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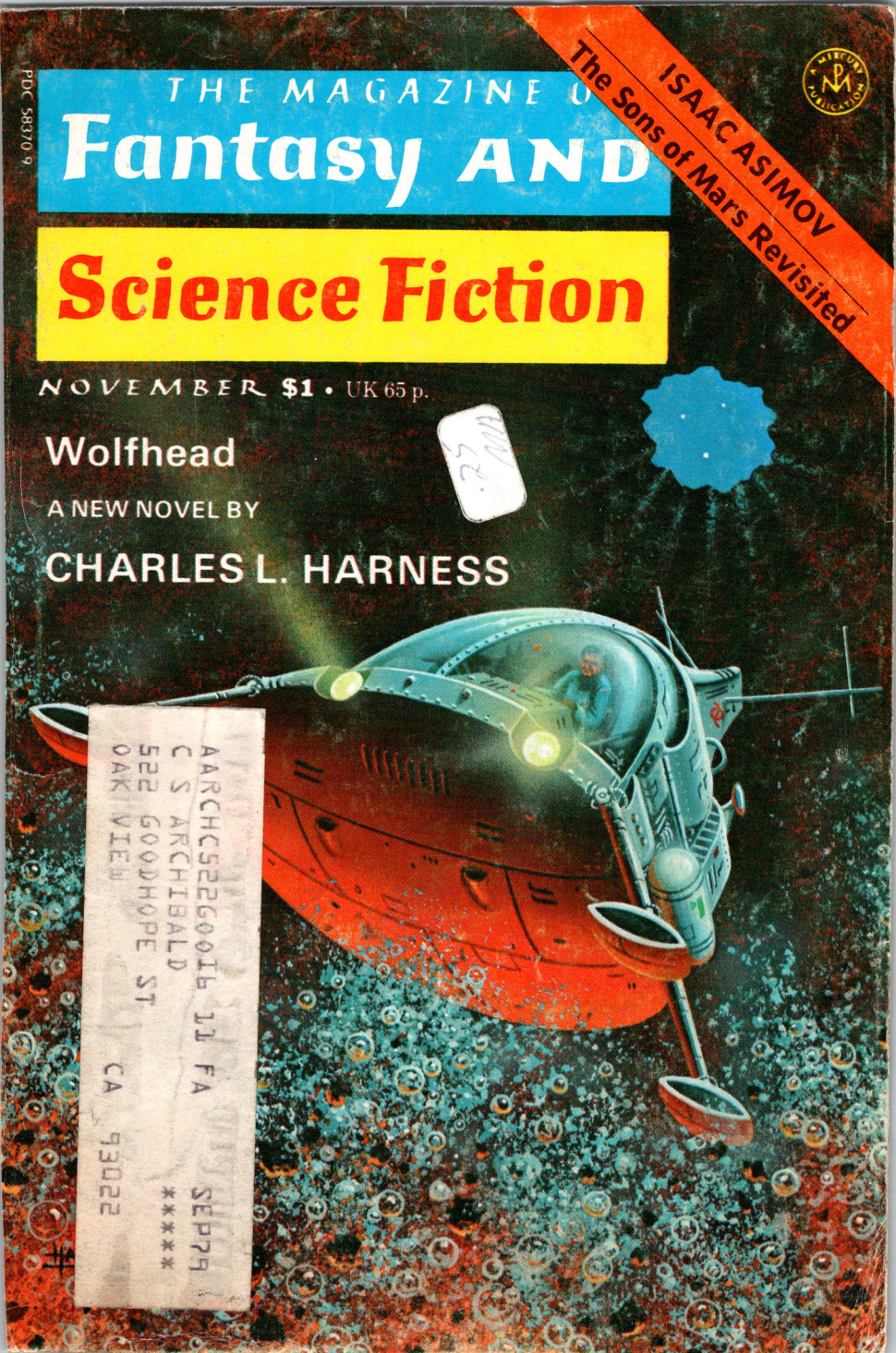

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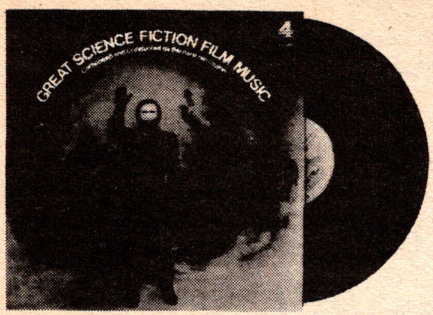

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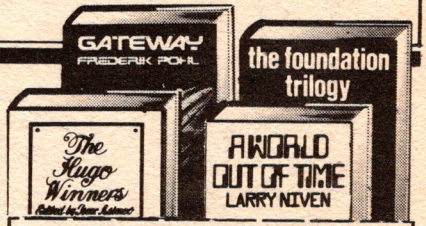

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Messrs. Pronzini and Malzberg — like most of us — have apparently been irritated by a certain change of emphasis on the sports pages. The result is this small gem of mordant extrapolation.

On Account of Darkness

by BARRY N. MALZBERG and BILL PRONZINI

So I took the Holographic Magnifier and the stick figures over to the Agency, talked myself past three secretaries, paid my one hour of humiliation waiting in the outside offices, and finally got into Evers' office. "I've got some terrific stuff here," I said, pulling it out of the case and laying it in front of him. "Jackie Robinson, the Duke, the Babe, the Splendid Splinter, a hundred more. A veritable Cooperstown of the mind."

"What's a Cooperstown?" he said.

"It was a famous museum where the uniforms and memorabilia of the greats were kept," I said. "Not that it matters. What matters is this: I can let you have the holographic stuff at a very reasonable price. Very reasonable."

"Football," Evers said. "There's no market for football anymore."

"This isn't football, it's baseball. Football was a contact sport of the twentieth century; baseball, purely of American origin, was played with a small round ball and a long thin piece of timber called a bat —"

"I'm not interested," Evers said. "Nothing personal, it's just that we have lots of problems here. The whole question of entertainment..." He shrugged.

"Well, I can appreciate the range of your problems," I said. "But what I've got here is really something special. Suppose I just give you a little demonstration?"

Evers yawned.

"Oh, come on," I said. "You let me in here, you let me get this far, you know you're a little interested already." I gave him an ingratiating smile. "Did you know there was a baseball player called Evers who was very famous in the early part of the twentieth century? A second baseman for the Chicago Cubs. Tinkers to Evers to Chance — that

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was this legendary double-play combination —"

"What's a Chicago Cub?" Evers said.

The trouble with the people at the Agency is that they are efficient but they have little historical sense. Historicity? Historicalness? They are extremely good on details, and they certainly know what will sell along the range of available techniques, but their grasp of specifics is limited. Not that I hold this against them, of course. They're only trying to do a job.

I began to set up the Magnifier, working with it until it hummed and glowed and vibrated on Evers' desk. He looked at it in a bored way and didn't look at me at all. So I said, "For that matter, there was a Hoot Evers who played for the Detroit Tigers, an outfielder in the 1950s. Hoot wasn't his real name, but that was what they called him. I think his real name was Charles."

"What's a Detroit?" Evers asked.

I concealed a sigh, setting up certain figures which I had preselected. Then I set the Magnifier for one-tenth life-size and hit the button, and the room was suddenly filled with heat and light and those strange smells that are supposed to be grass and peanuts and hot dogs. The ballplayers in their uniforms darting all over the office, like energetic little animals.

"Look at this," I said. "National League All-Stars of the middle twentieth century versus the greatest single team in baseball history, the 1927 New York Yankees. Yankees are the home team, so they're in the field first. The pitcher is Herb Pennock, Lou Gehrig is on first, Tony Lazzeri is at second..."

I went on to give him the line-ups. He didn't seem to be listening, but he had one eye cocked on Jackie Robinson striding up to the plate to lead off the game. "What's the object of all this, anyway?" he said.

"Well, the batter has to use the stick in his hands to hit the ball out of range of the fielders. If he does that, or if the pitcher misses that plate-shaped target, the batter is allowed to take one or more bases. Four bases constitute a run, and the team with the most runs at the end of the game —"

Evers raised a hand. "That's enough," he said, but he still had the one eye cocked on Robinson.

So I launched into a play-by-play, a technique which I have developed in the classic sense. Robinson hit Pennock's third pitch and grounded out to Koenig at short, and then Bobby Thompson took a called third strike. The next batter was Ted Kluzewski.

"This is pretty clever stuff," Evers said in a grudging way. He had both eyes on the game now.

"I've got to admit that."

"Oh, it's very clever," I said. "You can really get absorbed in it, you kow. One thing you should keep in mind is that this is only a one-tenth magnification here; you can imagine what the game is like when you lay it out in a conventionally sized stadium."

"I suppose so. But I still don't see the point of it all."

"Entertainment," I said. "Abstraction. Hundreds of years ago people used to obtain amusement watching these baseball games."

"But *why?*"

"Aesthetics," I said vaguely.

"How come you're so familiar with the subject?"

"I have a background. My great-great-grandfather worked for the last commissioner's office, and all of this was passed down through the family. A kind of heritage. And a hobby too."

"A strange hobby."

"Each to his own."

"Mmm," Evers said.

Kluzewski hit a ground ball between first and second for a single; Ruth tossed the ball back in to Lazzeri. "Next batter is Stan Musial," I said. "He might have been the best batter in his division during his time. Note the very unusual position he takes; that's the famous Musial Crouch. He's virtually batting on his knees as you can see."

Evers didn't say anything.

Musial, a first-ball hitter if ever there was one, sent a towering fly ball to right center that Earle Combs couldn't quite reach. The translucent ball bounced off the wall, rolled back to the infield; Lazzeri scooped it up and fired it to the catcher, Benny Bengough, holding Kluzewski at third and Musial at second.

"That was a typical Musial double," I said.

Evers said, "I think I'm losing interest. This may be clever stuff, but it doesn't entertain or amuse me at all."

"You haven't seen enough of it yet," I said as Willie Mays came up and popped the first pitch up to Koenig at short. "Now the teams switch places and the Yankees come to bat —"

"I'm just not interested," Evers said. "Turn it off."

I hesitated, but I could see that it was hopeless; sometimes you can press the point and sometimes you dare not. So much in this business is a matter of timing. I turned off the Magnifier, began to gather it and the stick figures together.

"The thing is," Evers said, "there's no real audience for it. I can see the elements of diversion, of course, but there just aren't enough of them."

I said nothing. There is a time to talk and then there is a time not

to talk, and off this great balance wheel are conducted all relationships and dealings.

"I suppose," Evers said, "that we might be able to do a little something with it in the Outlying Districts. But then again, it would hardly repay our investment. Visuals are a tricky commodity, you know."

A certain feeling of revulsion and pain began to work in me then. I had held it well down throughout this meeting, but it comes at odd moments, in little layers and surges of feeling. I seemed to see myself in ten other offices like Evers, past and present, at the mercy of people like him who understood very little and yet, somehow, controlled everything; I seemed to see myself getting older, beginning to die in stages, while the batteries in the Holographic Magnifier lost power and the figures of the great baseball players lost definition and finally faded altogether....

I had to say something then. So I said, "All right, I'll be going now; if you don't understand, I can't make you understand. You'll just never know, that's all, what a beautiful game it was." I turned and started for the door.

"Wait a minute now," Evers said.

I pivoted back toward him. "What?"

Evers cleared his throat. "I said there was very little in it, but, still and all, there might be *something* worthwhile. We might be able to convert it into an amusement for the juveniles, for example. Or there's the possibility of an exhibit over in the Central District of minor artifacts that we're planning to open." He fixed me with shrewd, veiled eyes. "We might be able to make a small bid, after all."

"How small?"

"Fifteen," he said.

"That's ridiculous. This is baseball, all of *baseball.*"

"Nobody knows what baseball is. I didn't; I still don't."

"It's something beautiful, something irreplaceable ..."

"Seventeen," Evers said. "That's my final offer."

"I've got to have twenty-five."

"Not from us."

"Twenty-two then. I have expenses to cover."

"Eighteen — but that's it. Yes or no? I'll have to put it on the Terminals right away."

"Eighteen," I said. "Listen, you're talking about an entire way of life for hundreds of thousands of people —"

"Good-by," Evers said.

"Now wait —"

"Eighteen, or good-by."

The pain and revulsion deepened within me, but I said, "All right. All right. But I'm giving you my whole life here; I'm giving you

hundreds of thousands of lives."

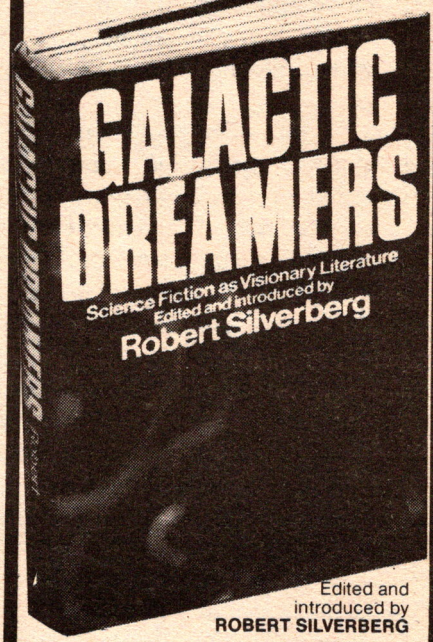
"We'll program the eighteen in," he said. "You can get a Verificatory from my secretary." He stood up. "It's been a pleasure having you and your quaint little pastime here, but now, if you don't mind ..."

He didn't offer his hand; he just looked away, dismissing me. So I took one last look at the Magnifier and the stick figures, and then I went out of there and took a railcab to my cubicle. Outside, the sky was just beginning to darken; night was coming on.

And the game is over, I thought. But then, if you wanted to look at it another way, they'd have called it anyway in the old days. On account of darkness. Called on account of darkness.

Then, still filled with pain, I sat down and went through my materials and tried to figure out the best places to unload hockey, basketball, and horse racing.

Science fiction as visionary literature



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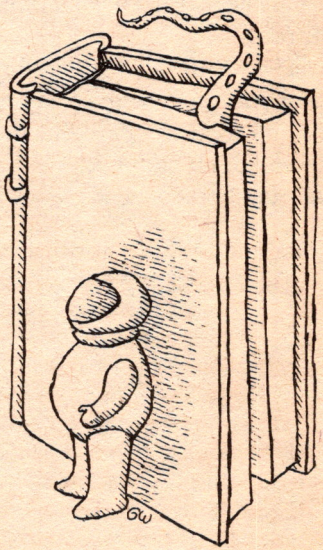


For a little while, now, let's take science fiction seriously.

Every so often, somebody says that, and then goes on to state a series of special premises which, each gently leading the next, take the sweet little lady firmly by the elbow and hustle her off across the street into some neighborhood where she may not have wanted to go.

I find plenty of that, for instance, among the material collected in *Turning Points*, "Essays on the Art of Science Fiction," edited by Damon Knight. H. Bruce Franklin, writing on "Science Fiction Before Gernsback," concludes with

> But those who find science fiction 'sub-literary' fail to see that ... (as) a different kind of literature from realistic fiction, science fiction demands a different kind of reading.

For another instance, Robert A. Heinlein, writing on "Science Fiction: its Nature, Faults and Virtues," says

> ... to that extent to which science fiction influences its readers toward greater knowledge, more independence of thought, and wider intellectual horizons, it serves its prime function.

Kingsley Amis, in "The Situa-

tion Today," a chapter extracted from *New Maps of Hell*, in which today was 1960, includes an apparently historical note:

> ... (in 1926) Gernsback was able to found the first journal exclusively dedicated to science fiction, *Amazing Stories*, which is still with us.

And so on. There are 23 inclusions in all, plus an introduction, and a total of 21 different voices, some of which speak more than once in more than one context. Not all the contributions are formal essays; some are transcripts of convention speeches, or reproduced discussions, and they range in age from 1947 — Heinlein's article "On the Writing of Speculative Fiction" from *Of Worlds Beyond** — up through the new Knight material here. What Knight has done is collect a splendid cross-section representing just about all the major kinds of serious thought that have been devoted to SF since World War II. 1947, and Eshbach, represent the emergence of earnest if not always impeccable consideration of SF. In the 30 years elapsed since then, we have piled up an amorphous body of scholarship at various levels of sophistication, and all those levels are at least hinted at in *Turning Points*.

Knight is and always has been an eclectic. He isn't, and never has been, an energetic champion of any particular theoretical point of view. He lays the pieces before us, and from then on it's up to us to evaluate their various merits. He makes that plain in his introduction, and he scatters small corrections and objections of his own throughout the book. These are couched as statements of fact, and statements of fact they are, but the salutary effect is to keep the reader reminded that Jove nods. Not everyone reads introductions, however, and many people tend to think that if an editor has filled a basket, he has done so because he wants to swallow the contents whole and is recommending something similar to his readers. Not so. What he wants you to do in this case is sample and think.

OK, I have thought. Professor Franklin, how can fiction be "realistic?" Oh, you mean it *represents* reality. In that case, what does science fiction represent? Insanity? Superstition? (If those are two different things.) What about "realistic fiction" written by fanatics or lobbyists? No, I think I'll

**A slim but powerful symposium on SF, published by Fantasy Press, Lloyd Arthur Eshbach, Ed. The other contributors were of equal stature in the field at that time. As far as I know, this was the first such volume that might actually have reached the libraries and influenced the general public to any appreciable extent.*

take a rain check on the idea that science fiction is *essentially* different from any other kind of fiction. One of these days, you'll find me counterproposing in greater detail; then we can hand-wrestle about it.

Bob, the "knowledge" in a story is filtered through the author, and usually represents research but not direct experience on his part. But where the author states objective intellectual facts he himself has determined in his role as say, an anthropologist or a physicist, he is unlikely to state objectively. Looking about me at the SF scene today, I find a great deal of re-statement of the sort of "truth" and attitude that has existed at the undergraduate level since colleges were invented, and which postgraduates then have to unlearn and re-examine.

I find that SF has, in one of its most articulate parts, become a repository for sophistry, shibboleth, and superficiality. This seems to have been an evolutionary outgrowth of, and is certainly the most fervent espousal of, the idea that fiction of any kind has a function beyond entertainment, and that science fiction has some sort of special mission. Now that appreciable time has passed since you made your statement, in the 1959 *The Science Fiction Novel* (Advent: Publishers), have you re-evaluated your view?

Kingsley, even in 1960 *Amazing Stories* was simply the logotype of the successor to the successor to the successor, bearing no relation to the policies and philosophies of its founder, who published something he called "scientifiction." That technotional sub-genre is as dead as *Air Wonder Stories* and *Science Fiction Plus*, and was, in every instance, a prompt commercial failure. Campbell developed "superscience" as an author, and "science fiction" as an editor, but the development was multiplex, not linear. Although *Astounding* published some stories which might be regarded as Gernsbackian, Campbell's major accomplishment in that sub-genre was to develop Hal Clement, who made the key step of substituting genuine scientific extrapolation for Gernsback's pop-science consumer technology. In other words, at the instant Clement was born, "scientifiction" died as an art, having long perished as an attraction to more than a narrow spectrum of readers.

Healy and McComas were about the first to assert, in their introductory material to the heavily influential *Adventures in Time and Space* anthology,* that there was true linearity from Gernsback to Campbell. They had to do that, if there was going to be an "old

Random House, 1948

science fiction" to validate their coining of the terms "modern science fiction" and "Golden Age" as synonymous with Campbellianism. But there is no more true linearity there than there is in the weathervaning and erratic transmogrification that have marked *Amazing's* history as a commercial property. *Astounding* was more descended from the fact that it could survive only by deviating from the Gernsbackian model than it was from any attempt at emulation.

And those are only three preliminary responses arising from my leafing back through the book, I swear to you at something very much like random. There are plenty of instances in my notes, but the book is so full of room for debate that you can close your eyes and put your finger on one in nearly every paragraph.

The moment you start talking theory in this field, or try to present its history, you're in trouble. The history is rotten; most of it is oral tradition, gossip, and the special pleading of hindsight. A lot of it is error crowned. I think Knight is trying to show us that, among other things. Of course, I would like him to show us that, because I think it can be shown. I have my own theories, and my own view of the history, you see.

There is plenty of directly useful material in the book, too — Richard McKenna's "Journey With a Little Man," which every would-be writer must read; Poul Anderson's "How to Build a Planet;" Milton Rothman's contribution to "Scientists in SF: a Debate," which stands in sharp contrast to the amazing assertions of Philip R. Geffe. But if you wanted to save just eleven pages, that would be Knight's essay on "Writing and Selling Science Fiction." When we start talking nuts and bolts, we're confident and helpful, and none so helpful as Knight.

Sometimes I get asked, after publishing a 1500-word review of something, why I didn't say whether I liked it. Let me assure you, unless I'm obviously in one of my sarcastic moods, if I spent 1500 words on it, I like it. More important, I thought about it, and I think you would be glad you did, too. Go buy it.

I spent 80,000 words on something a while ago. I have written you and me a book called *Michaelmas*. When it appeared here in abridged form as a two-part serial, some members of the Science Fiction Writers of America were good enough to propose it for a Nebula nomination last year. I withdrew it because while I had done the cutting myself, and was pleased with the conscientiousness that Ed

Ferman and his production staff brought to it, 45,000 words is not the same as what Putnam's has published now.

I also considered asking someone else to review it. But I think the strain on a guest reviewer makes the result awkward. Instead, I'm just going to talk to you about our story.

It's about Laurent Michaelmas, who has appeared as a subsidiary character in several other stories in his role as the world's leading newsman during the last years of this century. As such, he was someone you saw but whose thinking you didn't know. *Michaelmas* is told from the inside, and now you can see he actually is the manager of the world. Not the ruler. Because he lives at the height of the communication revolution, and has access to every bit of transmitted or stored data in major sectors of the world, he is someone who can detect major and monor defalcations as soon as they occur. He can expose them subtly, or store up the knowledge for use against future need, and he can do that without blowing his cover.

Telling a convincing story about a man in such a position has always been a technically difficult task. If you propose omniscience and omnipotence for the leading character, how can he ever be seriously troubled? And how could he realistically keep track of all the inputs without going insane?

Fortunately for me as a writer, communications technology and the social use of modern data processing have made this story artistically possible at last, or so I think. It seems to me that if someone had begun early enough to surreptitiously and systematically invade the world's data-transmission networks with that purpose in mind — in the early 1970s, say, and then kept up the process — he could by, say, 1990, achieve what Michaelmas has done.

And given the nature of what computer art can be expected to attain shortly, he would have both an effective tool and one capable of preventing his organic brain from becoming overloaded with unevaluated data, as well as of answering his phone when he wanted to prepare a decent meal for himself. It also seems to me — and Carl Sagan appears to be validating this thought with certain passages in *The Dragons of Eden** — that

**Doctor Sagan's help with an aspect of* Michaelmas *is acknowledged in an Author's Note. However, our conversation had nothing to do with computers. This more recent development is a coincidence on both sides. Oscar Wilde said that Nature imitates Art, and although he didn't join Sidney Coleman, Sagan and myself at that particular lunch, I suppose he might have had his ear pressed to the windows.*

Michaelmas's home-brewed processing program would have to be sufficiently complex, and would have access to sufficient quantities of data, so that the program would begin to display personality. (Strictly speaking, Michaelmas has no computer of his own.) And so we might develop a character like Michaelmas's insubstantial companion and prospective heir, Domino.

So now I had two omniscient characters to portray, one of them incapable of scratching his tummy or lighting a cigarette, which are two things we authors rely on to establish traits and indicate mood. And I had to think up a possible menace. Under the circumstances, that had to be something more than your run-of-mill BEM. I have of course succeeded brilliantly, surpassing even my own reputation as an SF technician and ratiocinator, and the novel stands as a landmark of Post-Cartographic SF, sweeping in its ....

Speaking of sweeping, I must tell you that the first 57 pages of the rough draft were written in an office I created by moving some shipping crates out from under the light bulb in my cellar, in January, 1965, after leaving *Playboy*. I had not planned a novel since 1958, or written one since 1960, and those pages, laying down the basic situation, naming all the major characters, and establishing the entire structure of the story in my mind, came out unbidden and as fast as I could type them, detail falling in after detail, character names presenting themselves with the facility of visiting cards hitting a tray, and me with my back aching and my fingers developing a tremor while my wife brought me coffee from time to time. Obviously, something had been going on in the back of my mind while I was spending 118 hours a week trying to figure out how to get 35 author names into a symmetrical block on the cover of the *12th Anniversary Playboy Reader* without hyphenating a one of them. (I gave the job to Gene Klinger, who now researches for Frank Robinson and Tom Scortia).

So much for the role of conscious intellect. Essentially the same thing had happened with the key portion of *Rogue Moon*, with the establishing scene of *Who?*, and continues to happen. It happened in many small ways while, over the years, I went off to do other things and finally got *Michaelmas* written down over 1975 and 1976. With me, the words you finally see in print are a scrupulous, happy but often procrastinated, sometimes fearful process of explaining to myself what the hell I imagined, and then of meticulously conveying it to you.

A lot of writers work something like that, and it shoots most theory to hell. It simultaneously confines and elevates most writing courses to the level of home fix-it.

Speaking of meticulous, I spent a lot of time with Putnam's copy-editing function, getting them to understand that in SF "earth" and "sun" and "solar system" frequently need to be capitalized, and getting them to see to it that "experimential" did not emerge as "experimental."* They did a rather good job, despite some eccentric re-writing by the compositor in the first galleys. And the book as a book, once you throw away the jacket end-flap copy, is beautiful.

Of course, I also used a lot of foreign words and phrases, many of which it turns out I didn't know how to spell, and Putnam's editors took care of that, too. They saved my pride a dozen times, so how can I blame them if, at one point, "Viola" came out *Voila!*? I also found at least two places where my manuscript said something plausible at first glance, but confusing and stupid; unfortunately, I found them after the book had been manufactured. I don't know what I was thinking of, the many times I re-typed the manuscript or proofread my wife's final copy. Go found a theory on that.

So there it is. I liked it.

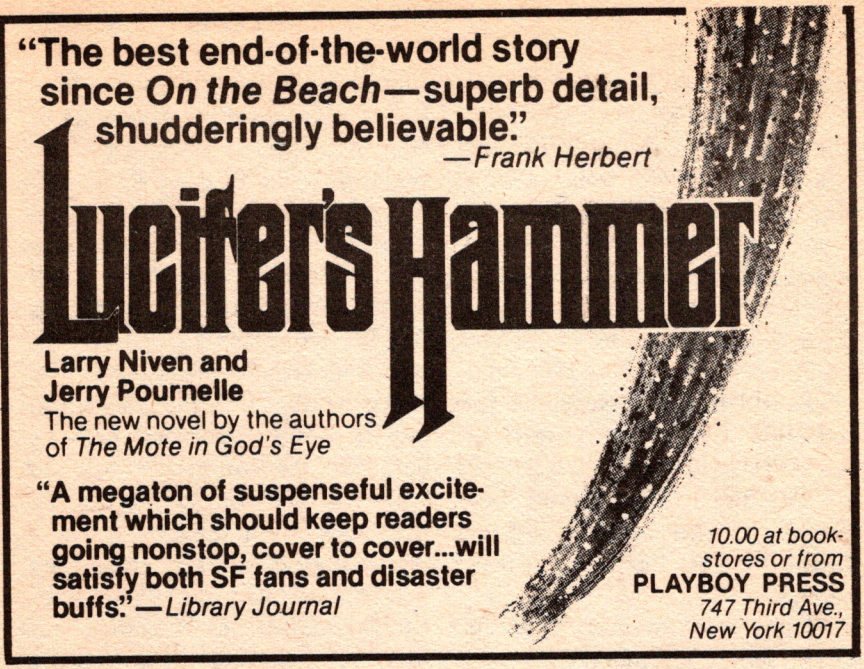
A man who knew what story was is dead. Edmond Hamilton died in February, at 72, mourned by anyone who knew him even slightly. He was a slight, spare man who was so big inside that not all of it could possibly get out on paper in time, not even if it had Ed Hamilton's energy behind it.

Hamilton's work is treated with contempt by many SF scholars, and even when fans had sprawling letter columns in which to express their reactions, he was called "World-Wrecker Hamilton" by many of his admiring readers. There was a certain attempt at sophistication in that. They knew, because they had been told, that stories like his were less worthy than "serious" SF, and they wanted to make sure everybody understood they were aware of better things, even while they scraped up and plucked down the nickels and dimes.

I was one of them, and never once did I take deep thought that the 15¢ I painfully created for a copy of *Startling Stories* came out of the exact same 5¢-per-hour farm work that got me my two bits for the same month's issue of *ASF*, or the $1.00 bus ride to the newsstand

**I may turn my attention to this magazine's copy-editing people pretty soon, and then start in on the compositor who drops out entire phrases that don't get restored whether the result is gibberish or not.*

"The best end-of-the-world story since *On the Beach*—superb detail, shudderingly believable."
—*Frank Herbert*



Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle
The new novel by the authors of *The Mote in God's Eye*

"A megaton of suspenseful excitement which should keep readers going nonstop, cover to cover...will satisfy both SF fans and disaster buffs."—*Library Journal*

10.00 at bookstores or from
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where I found them both. I wasn't very independent in my thinking in 1943, at least not sufficiently independent, and when I met the man years later it was his gentle voice, his warm welcome to a novice, essentially his gentlemanliness, that made me for life a fan of Ed Hamilton as distinguished from and in addition to being a fan of his work.

They are going, and we are going with them. We never understood them, and so we persist in not understanding ourselves. A man of Hamilton's intellect, education and compassion falls into contemptuous footnotes at the hands of some stripling post-Doc, and nobody stops to wonder how it could be that an individual of such worth should have his imagination declared worthless. Just whose error is that? I tell you only that I feel robbed because Ed and I never got a clear chance to sit down even once on the bank of a creek someplace and not say anything to each other for even one fruitful afternoon, while I am passionately glad not to answer letters from more than one out of each score of would-be postulators on this medium.

In *The Best of Edmond Hamilton*, Leigh Brackett, his wife, has done something few individuals can do for another. She has put together an honest collection of what her husband expressed to his readers over the years since "The

Monster-God of Mamurth," from *Weird Tales*, 1926, to "The Pro," from this magazine in 1964, and "Castaway," 1968, from a Moskowitz-edited anthology, *The Man Who Called Himself Poe*. In between, although there is "What's it Like Out There," and "Requiem," there is no inclusion of "Home Run" or more of the 1960s-style stories which could have loaded this collection with a bias toward the "new" Hamilton some proclaimed at that time. That would have buried the sort of work Ed did during the first thirty-five years of his career.

There was no new Hamilton, and Brackett, an outstanding storyteller and veteran of essentially the same media Ed used, tacitly says so by refusing to even see the possibility in her loving and useful introduction.

The nice thing about this book is that it was compiled before Hamilton's death; just before. It is exactly on time. It's half of a pair — next time, we'll look at *The Best of Leigh Brackett*, edited by Edmond Hamilton — and surely this is a unique piece of good fortune.

Hamilton could do what no hack can do; he could think about how he met the reader's requirements. When he used cliches, he used them because he knew we used them as old friends, the same way kids at Saturday matinees used to gleefully and fondly stay one step ahead of the plot developments in Don "Red" Barry western movies. When he wrote in the style of Abe Merritt, that was one of the givens — like FTL drives, galactic empires, italicized precedes, people named Shor Nuf; and phrasings like 'Vorgan Muln swept hurriedly into the Great Aviary, his twin hearts beating with the conjectural import of the paradoxical news he bore to the Autarch' were in "modern science fiction." And when he wrote in the style of one of the masters of his day, attempting to wedge his way into their audience, he nevertheless thought about what an invisible spider-being would really look like, in the vasty grandeur of its invisible palace.

He was thinking of us, you see. He was putting his story where we could find it, and understanding our heads so he could unfold a pleasurable display within their limitless confines. When he was standing in a group and conversing with new acquaintances, or sitting in a bar and meeting with his peers, or courting his lady, he spoke for himself. But when he wrote, he spoke from himself, and he did not attempt to convince us he was thinking of theory or introducing himself as a personality into the privacy of our personalities. He was thinking of us.

I liked it.

About Charles L. Harness: "I was born in 1915 in West Texas ... eventually became a policeman in the identification bureau of the Fort Worth Police department. Later, in Washington, D. C. I took a degree in chemistry, then another in law, married and became a father. I started writing science fiction in 1947 to clear up the obstetrical bills that followed my daughter's entrance into the world. I stopped (temporarily) a few years later, because she would stand in the hallway under my attic studio and cry for me to come down and play. When she left for college I began writing again, and I'm still at it. For many years I have been a patent attorney for a large corporation. I live in rural Maryland with my wife and son." Mr. Harness is the author of THE ROSE and THE RING OF RITORNEL, and his new novel is a fresh and fast-paced post-holocaust thriller that is guaranteed to engage your attention.

Wolfhead

(1st of 2 parts)

by CHARLES L. HARNESS

Prologue

Now came a she wolf, lean and horrid.
She has brought (and she will bring)
Many to grief.

— The Prophet Dante,
Inferno, Canto I

Day fades to evening; the darkening air
releases all creatures from their daily
tasks, save me.
For I must make ready for my great
journey.
The death and blood and pity that I
met,
my memory shall now retrace.

— The Prophet Dante,
Inferno, Canto II.

Like the great prophet, I write this because I must.

I think of them all, men, women, children. Innocents, nearly all of them. We bore each other no ill will. Most of them did not even know I existed. In my nightmares I see their strange white faces. I waken, sweating.

I write this so that the thing may be finally finished.

Was It Hours, or Years Ago?

All through the sunlit fields we ran.
We trod the shady forest trails.
I felt your face, I touched your hand.
We wandered wide o'er hill and vale.

Everywhere, Nowhere
I see you in the clouds that fly
In fleecy lines across the sky.
Your whispers mingle with the leaves
That drift from autumn's changeling
trees.

I Wake, and Listen
In the darkness of my cabin
I hear a step. I call a name.
Is it but the wind, tapping,
Sighing at my windowpane?

1. *Who I Am*

My name is Jeremy Wolfhead. Actually, I don't have a wolf head. For better or worse, it is a rather ordinary head, with yellow hair and blue eyes. Grandfather used to say that even if I had the intelligence of a dire wolf, I still wouldn't be smart enough to take over the business after he dies. (Wolfhead and Company, Restorations.)

Our family has been called Wolfhead as far back as the records go. There are two theories as to how we got the name. Firstly, perhaps one of my ancestors really had a wolf head, and became famous for it, and so started our name. If so, he was born in the days of the Desolation, when such mutations were commonplace, perhaps even a source of pride, and not a subject for dismay, as they are today. The second explanation is perhaps closer to the mark. Many centuries ago one of my ancestors, a Friar named Cornhunter, prophesied that one of our family would take the head of a wolf, descend into hell, destroy a great and evil culture, and come out safe again. Traditionally our family smiled at Brother Cornhunter, and some of our wiser people thought him quite mad.

The strange psychic powers of the Friars (also called the Brothers) are now much lessened, and perhaps I am the cause of it, for better or worse. I don't believe the loss matter much. The Brothers emerged, some two thousand years ago, to guide and succor what was left of us and to preserve some of our crumbled civilization. They taught us how to plant, how to raise livestock, and to read and write. From them we relearned metallurgy and our simple sciences. They kept the healing arts to themselves, but the rest they taught well, and they will be remembered forever for it.

My ancestors originally lived on the banks of the great Mispi River. Three hundred years ago (so our tradition goes) one of them, Messer Fallowt Wolfhead, gathered up his wife, children, horses, and cattle, and began the trek east. He had heard (from the Friars, probably) that the radiation left over from the Desolation had waned and was no longer lethal, and that the land was rich and fertile again. It took his wagons four months to make the journey, for there were no roads then, and no air machines. (It would be another two hundred years before his descendants dug the first floater out of the debris of the suburbs of ancient Freddrick and restored it.)

Having arrived at the Lantick Ocean (which quite astonished my ancestor), he scouted the shore for one hundred miles in either direction and finally selected what is now called Horseshoe Bay. This is a cliff-lined circle of water about ten miles in

diameter facing squarely on the ocean. The eastern seaboard is peppered with hundreds of these giant circles, some larger, some smaller. Sometimes they seem to merge together to make one colossal pit, which is generally full of water and makes a fine lake. For example, to the southwest of us there is a very large lake having numerous scalloped edges. This very beautiful lake lies (if you will believe our teaching Friars) where the ancient city of Washton once stood.

Horseshoe Bay bites deep into the shore, and at its deepest recess the land dips down to the water, making an excellent harbor. Most any day you can stand on the rim and watch the ships. You will see both sailing ships and the faster nuclear vessels (many restored by grandfather's shops). The land all around the horseshoe is flat and fertile. It is watered by several streams, and rainfall is plentiful. So here my forefathers settled. Other immigrants from the west joined them. Over the years, farms became villages, some of the villages became towns, and the town at the harbor became New Bollamer.

During this time contact with other peoples in other lands, even across the great Lantick, was re-established.

When my ancestors settled here, they were under the very reasonable impression that they were the only human beings within hundreds of miles.

I will tell you now (so that we can dispose of the matter and get on to other things), I like to hunt. My grandfather taught me when I was a boy. I kept it up when I entered Bollamer Collegia to begin my study of Excavation and Restoration. I very nearly did not graduate because I got fed up during the middle of exam week and took the floater up into the Penn Woods in search of a giant stag I had heard about. Armed only with a good hunting knife, I followed the stag south on foot for four days and four nights, with no rest for him or for me. He tried to escape me by swimming nearly a mile across a very cold lake. But I was right behind him (I dearly love a good swim).

Soon after we emerged from the lake, the scenery began to change.

Overhead I noticed low fog-clouds, sweeping eastward over the tree tops, and I heard a dull thunder, growing louder in the west. I suddenly realized where we were. This splendid animal was leading me to the Spume, where he might lose his pursuer in the ground wraiths, scentless steam, and deafening noise that accompanied this remarkable phenomenon. It was his final effort to stay alive. And indeed it was an immensely clever and desperate thing for an animal to come here, over so many miles, to engineer his final attempt at escape. As far as I was concerned, he had earned his life, and I then and there gave it back to him.

I knew the Spume only by reputation. This was my first actual confrontation, and I was eager to see it. In moments I was at the top of the hill and looking over at the colossus. I could see and hear the whole thing.

The Spume crater had been built up over the course of centuries as a drenched and mottled cone of jumbled rocks, a hundred yards across from lip

to lip. A column of steam roared two miles skyward out of this crater. For a circle of a mile around, there were only a couple of trees, and these were dead. The area was grief-stricken, desolate.

Only the Spume was alive.

As I stood there, entranced, a great rock broke off from the crater edge and fell into the steam column. It must have been half as large as our stable; yet it was hurled up and out again immediately, and it crashed a thousand yards away from me on the other side of the crater. Despite the distance, I felt the earth shake beneath my feet.

But all of this was simply the framework, the physical setting, as it were, for the mighty thing that was taking place there, continuously, hour by hour, day by day, and century by century. My neck arched back as, with unbelieving eyes, I followed the steam column upward. When the stream finally ceased to rise any higher, the top layer began to float eastward with the prevailing wind. And then, far at the top of that magnificent plume, the steam began to change, mostly, I think, on account of the cold. (For it was mid-January.) The steam first condensed to water droplets. Some of these fell as rain, within the barren annihilated area. Some water droplets were exposed longer to the cold, and these fell as sleet and hail. Some joined together to make ice stones big enough to break a man's skull. I jumped as a fist-sized ball of ice fell almost at my feet. Getting my head broken would be a silly way to end a great hunt. So I retreated a hundred yards up the hill. There I saw another remarkable thing. Off to my right was a strange white mountain, which I judged to be made entirely of snow. Some of the steam was changing to snow, and it was falling from great heights and with great whispering hisses, to make a long dune-shaped drift, perhaps half a mile high and a mile wide, and stretching out eastward for miles and miles, over the forest, at the beck of the west wind.

While I was standing spellbound I noticed movement below. The great stag skirted the deadly bombardment of ice, circled the deafening steam column, and disappeared on the other side. Three dire wolves were running close behind him. He would probably die deaf, and the wolves might never hear properly again. What a sorry end to four days and nights on the trail! I held my hands over my head, closed my eyes to slits, and, keeping a safe distance from the Spume, ran in a great circle to follow them.

There on the other side of the vapor pillar, I found them. The antlered king had been pulled down by the wolves, who were even now, amid steam, sleet, noise, and snowfall, eating him alive. One wolf lifted his head in my direction, snarled, and started for me. Fortunately there was a great dead tree nearby. I shinnied up that trunk inches ahead of clicking teeth. As I climbed I cursed my decision to bring a knife instead of a rifle. But even with a rifle, it would have been stupid to try to sneak away with night about to fall, because, although I could not see the wolves, they could see me very well indeed. And I will now explain why this is so.

The Brothers tell us that during the centuries of the Desolation, immense

clouds of dust covered the skies, blotting out the sun, giving an eternal night. Certain strange plants and animals developed, that could cope better with the darkness. The dire wolf was one. It can "see" in total blackness by means of infrared sensors in its ocular cavities. So, for nocturnal operations these animals had a tremendous advantage over a mere human being.

A final observation. From the crotch of branches where I spent the night, I had to dislodge the rib cage of some strange vertebrate, long ago picked clean by crows and buzzards. How it had got up into the tree, I could not them imagine. (I learned only much later.) And so I spent an uncomfortable night, shivering, and pondering the awesome power of the Spume and the contrary nature of dire wolves.

The next week I was back at the collegia. Grandfather had to finance a chair of Nuclear Engine Rebuilding, and then they let me graduate.

Afterwards, when I was working in Grandfather's shops, I often thought about that gorgeous prince of antlers. He stood over seven feet at the shoulder. I am only five feet ten inches, and a mere fraction of his weight; yet I persisted. I do not know anyone who has run down a giant stag. As long as he had to get eaten, I would rather we did it, and not the wolves. So, in a way, I was sorry I could not get him home into our food locker. Not that grandfather likes venison. But he buys it when the hunters bring it around. And you will find heads of giant stags in his trophy room at the lodge. He shot them all himself, when he was a young man. But he can no longer take the time, he claims, especially since he has to give my work such careful supervision and make sure he catches all my mistakes. As, otherwise (he says), my visi sets seem to turn into radios and my atom engines run backward. Actually, I was not all that bad, but I did tend to think about hunting a lot, even when I should be finishing a restoration.

As this point, perhaps I should explain what happened to my parents.

They are dead.

One fine morning (and fresh from the wedding bed, for he had married my mother but the week before) my father set off jauntily in his little floater, *Wolfhead*, with the avowed purpose of exploring the sea caves along the coast. He sailed out over the bay, with my mother waving to him merrily, and he disappeared around the cliffs, and neither he nor *Wolfhead* was ever seen again. My mother died in childbirth, partly from an infection following my entry into the world and partly because she could not accept the fact that my father was dead. And so my grandfather took over my upbringing.

2. *Beatra*

I met Beatra at the Winter Ball. The orchestra was still tuning up, and the actual dancing had not yet begun. Floaters were still arriving. Most of the men were in the wineroom. The upstairs dressing room was full of ladies. And that is where the action started.

I had just entered the lobby and was in the act of handing my greatcoat to the footman, when the Lady Mary Weaver burst out upon the upstairs

landing, shrieking and waving her arms. I was first to cross the dance floor and to bound up the stairs to her rescue.

"In there!" She did not need to point. Girls, ladies, dames, females of all ages and in various stages of finery were pouring out of the room.

"What is it?" I demanded.

But not one of them would answer me. They were too terrified to speak.

Evidently a dangerous animal had crawled up the guttering, broken into the window, and even now was preparing to come forth and attack these helpless creatures! Perhaps a giant carcajou, teeth bared and slavering, was even now slinking toward the door!

I had no weapon. I turned to the men by me. "An electro? A knife? Anything?"

They shook their heads.

There was an empty suit of armor at the top of the stairs. The empty metal glove held a great pikestaff. I wrenched it away and strode to the door.

"Careful, man." cried voices behind me.

I held the staff high like a spear and leaped inside. There was a flash of movement to my right. I very nearly hurled the staff. And then when I saw what caused the movement, I felt faint.

It was a girl. A very beautiful girl. She was standing before a mirror, and she had been in the simple act of pulling her slip down over her body. I caught a glimpse of bare thighs, of thinly concealed legs and belly.

I looked around the room quickly. There was no beast. There was nothing.

The stained-glass window was open by half an inch. "Did it go back down the gutter?" I asked, without looking at her.

"No, milord, it didn't go back down the gutter." She was now struggling to pull her gown down over her head. "I need help."

"But ... the *animal* ...?"

"It is under the wardrobe cabinet."

The cabinet sat barely an inch off the floor. Now I understood. I dropped the halberd and went over to help her. "A mouse?"

"A mouse. Now, you must pull down, on both sides, and then there are certain catches and buttons."

I did everything just the way she instructed. I felt her soft flesh through the folds of cloth. Not that I was trying to. I smelled her perfume, a light, delicate thing, like wild cherry pollen in early morning.

"Thank you, kind sir," she said, looking at herself in the mirror from all angles. "Now, about our little visitor. I shall pass the handle of your staff under the wardrobe, and when Sir Grayfur runs out, you must slap your kerchief down over him."

"Couldn't I just jump on him?"

"Certainly not." Without a backward glance she walked over to the wardrobe with the heavy staff.

She had made it sound easy. But it wasn't. It took several tries, because the little creature zigzagged quite a bit. But finally I had him wrapped in my best blue kerchief.

I looked at her. "What now?"

"Drop him out the window."

I objected. "The fall won't kill him. It is barely twenty feet, and there is six inches of soft snow on the ground."

"Exactly."

And so I did.

"Now give me your kerchief." She took it to the backroom and washed it out. "You can pick it up some time ...."

Oh, she was beautiful! I said, "Since you are now adequately rescued, may I have the first dance?"

"I would be honored, O mighty hunter." She curtsied deep, then took my arm. We walked through the throng at the doorway, leaving the halberd on the floor, and let them make their wildest surmises.

Six weeks later, Beatra and I were married and living at Horseshoe Manor.

3. *Kidnapped!*

We had been married a matter of days, when we both took a notion to arise very early on a certain morning in an attempt to view a strange phenomenon known as the "gods-eye." This was a brilliant starlike pinpoint of light, visible best early in the morning or in late evening, which arched briefly across the sky and then vanished.

The tiny bell sounded. I was already nearly awake, and I reached over and turned off the alarm. I looked briefly at the illuminated numbers on the chron: 5:30.

It was totally dark, and I could not make out Beatra's form under the furs beside me. But she was there. Ah, she was there ....

In the dark I heard the great hound scramble to his feet. "Not a sound, Goro," I whispered. "Be a good fellow, and in a moment we will all go for a walk." I heard a muffled whine and the swish of the tail wagging.

I eased out of bed, found my sandals and robe, and shuffled over to the massive shuttered windows. They groaned as I pulled them back. I peered through the iron gratings and beyond the cliff to the water. Horseshoe Bay reflected the stars like a mirror. The sky was clear. No moon. No clouds. I stared hard toward the northeast. Nothing there yet. Good. I looked down into the statuary garden. Nothing stirred the cedars. Off to the left and right, and barely visible, were the edges of the orchards and cornfields, dark and somnolent. All was as it should be. We were an hour to cockcrow.

I returned to the bed. Beatra was still asleep. I leaned over and ran my hand over the outline of her body and came to rest on her bare neck.

She awoke drowsily. "What time is it?"

"Time to get up. The awakener has sounded."

She pushed the great bearskin back and sat up in bed. "The honeymoon is over. Married two weeks, and now roused from bed in the middle of the night."

"It's 5:30, going on 6."

"It is pitch-dark and it is the middle of the night."

"Come look out the window. Here's a fur and slips."

I smelled her perfume as she got up. Her scent eddied and whirled and followed her.

She seized the cold window bars with her hands and took a deep breath. "Just look at the stars."

"Yes, just look at them. And if we are going to catch the gods-eye as it comes up over the horizon, we had

better hurry. Here, put your things on."

We dressed quickly. I took the porto-lamp, and Beatra followed me down the dark steps, down halls, more steps, and into the great kitchen. Here I unbarred the back door. We stepped outside, and I made sure the big bronze key was safe in its hiding place behind the corner yew. Then, off we went, around the great manor and up the path that led to the crest of the ridge. Goro bounded ahead as if he knew where we were going.

From the ridgetop we looked back. The great stone house lay white and silent in the starlight. The servants were doubtless still alseep and would be for another hour yet.

The dog trotted ahead. There was no danger, of course, but it was good to have him along. Especially on account of Beatra. Years ago, when grandfather had first begun what was now the right wing of the manor house, bears had fed in the wild berry patches in the forest edge, and wolves came down from Penn and Nyock, and perhaps from even as far north as Canda. But the place was not quite so wild, now. The forest had yielded to the plow. All around the bay rim the fields were green, and there were meadows for the cattle and horses. And beyond grandfather's holdings there were other greathouses, and cottages in their shadow, and other croplands. To go hunting now, it was necessary to journey by floater into the northern forests and stay in our log cabin for a week or more. Ah, what fun that was. And what a relief from working in grandfather's shops in New Bollamer. I was already planning a trip to the cabin with Beatra.

We stopped at the cliff edge. I pointed. "It should rise over the grottoes. Brother Montrey has worked out the ascension."

Beatra hunched her shoulders deeper into her furs and peered over the water. We could see nothing unusual. No moving light. We heard only the surf at the foot of the cliffs.

"Are you cold?" I asked in sudden concern.

"No. It's just the change, from the bed to here."

She moved to put me between her and the light land breeze. "What do you suppose it is, the gods-eye?"

"No one really knows. It circles the earth once a day. But we can see it only just before sunrise or just after sunset, sort of like a morning or evening star. Montrey thinks it is a great ball, hurled into the sky by the ancients. But how could they do that? And why? It doesn't make much sense."

Goro whined softly. We were all silent a moment. I searched the darkened land for a moment with narrowed eyes. "Perhaps a rabbit," I said softly. "There is still quite a bit of game out at night." I turned my head back to the horizon, then screened the lantern. "There it is."

A brilliant point of light sprang up over the distant grottoes. We watched, spellbound, hardly breathing, as it rose higher and higher.

"Ah, beautiful," whispered Beatra. The wind at her back was blowing her hair around her eyes, and she lifted a hand to brush it aside.

In that instant several shapes took silent form on our right.

By pure reflex I grabbed Beatra by

the arm and started to pull her behind me. Where was Goro! Weapon? I had brought nothing. A stick ... even a rock ....

There was a muffled cry. A strange tongue, but I could understand the words. "Mr. President — the dog!"

And now Goro's instincts destroyed him. For twenty thousand years his ancestors had been companions to man and had hunted with man. But always the quarry had been game — never man. Goro hesitated. For here was man, sacred man, who threatened his master and who therefore must be killed. His hesitation was so brief it was barely detectable. But it was too much. The tall figure got off two shots. The first caught Goro in midleap and tore his head off. Goro's corpse struck the tall one just as the gun fired again. I knew I was hit. I sank to my knees. "Beatra ..." I whispered. But already the raiders were gagging her and dragging her away.

I fell over backwards. I lay there, remembering those enormous owl-like eyes, those cold white cheeks, barely visible in the faintly lightening sky.

Undergrounders.

I knew the myths, but until now I had not believed such people really existed.

Mr. President. That face had taken Beatra and had killed Goro. And perhaps me, Jeremy. No, not Jeremy. I was going to live.

Mr. President, we would meet again.

My eyes closed as the shining gods-eye moved slowly overhead in massive majesty.

4. *Words Without Sound*

I felt a strange prolonged blur, from which slow-moving images separated from time to time. It was like a long, long dream. Once or twice there was a flash of red pain, but I did not really mind, because I was outside watching it all.

Sometimes I thought I heard voices. Somehow the voices were inside me — inside my head. As though they were forming in my brain, and my ears were quite unnecessary for this.

First voice: "He may be the man."

Second voice: "Perhaps."

First voice: "We must rely on the prophecy. We must believe that he will live, even through the test, and that he will make the journey."

Second voice: "There is the question of the darkness."

First voice: "If he is the man, all things will be provided for him."

Second voice: "Should we tell Father Phaedrus?"

First voice: "Soon. There will be time."

Second voice: "Not much time. He is dying."

Then all the voices seemed to merge together in weird and fearful harmony: "Dying ... dying ... dying ..."

Did they mean me? I was not going to die. I refused to die. I clenched my teeth and tried to concentrate.

Now one of the images was coming out of the fuzzy background again. "Don't try to talk," said the image. The shape wore a dark-gray robe, and a cowl dropped about his neck. Eyes gradually emerged from the face and peered at me.

I peered back, but my eyes were in poor focus. I closed my eyes and moved the fingers of my right hand carefully. They responded. That was good. Somehow it surprised me. I let my hand and arm move up over and beyond my chest. My fingers tried to touch the flesh of my face, but my face and head were encased in something.

The world began to howl at me. I squeezed my eyelids together as hard as I could and brought both hands up to my head.

Things were coming back to me.

Beatra and I. And Goro, the hound. Walking up the path to the cliff edge in the dark starlit morning. To see the god-light.

And then the figures emerging downwind out of the darkness. The shots. Beatra ...? Oh, great gods! What had happened to Beatra?

I raised my hand and pointed a finger at the gray figure. I tried to talk. My lips moved, but only animal gibberish came forth.

"I told you, don't try to talk just now," admonished the gray man. "It will take time. Don't worry, you'll talk again."

I moaned.

The other was also a cowled gray-robed figure, not quite as tall as the first. He took something from the table and showed it to me. It was a slate and a piece of chalk. "For the time being, try this."

The gray man held the slate as I slowly scraped out a word: "Beatra?"

He stood impassive a moment. "We will discuss Beatra later. First, we want you to get stronger."

It was so, then. Beatra had been taken ... kidnapped. Or maybe even killed, even as Goro had been killed. I groaned. But it wasn't a proper groan. Even though it was involuntary, the sound was not quite right. Something was wrong with my voice.

I realized I was in a hospital. That much was clear. I could surmise a few things. Go back to the beginning. The servants had heard the shots. They had found me and had taken me to the monastery surgery. That must have been several days ago. The bullet had caused brain damage, and it had affected my powers of speech.

Now *that* was curious. Was I deducing all these things, or were the men in gray talking to me? I seemed to hear their voices, and yet their lips were not moving.

There was another thing. The hazy thought was reaching me that a bit of my cerebral cortex had been snipped out and that the surgical Friars were keeping it alive as a culture to await my disposal — if I lived.

They had done well, I thought. Why had they done well? I wasn't sure.

I scratched another word on the slate: "Grandfather?"

"Baron Wolfhead knows you are here. We will permit him to see you in a few days. Patience."

Now all this was quite extraordinary. I had been watching him carefully, and he had answered me without moving his lips. He smiled faintly.

I decided to try something. I looked at him and let a question form in my mind. "Who are you?"

"I am Brother Arcrite. I am the abbot here. And this is Brother Tien." His mouth had remained shut.

What kind of communication is this, I wondered. Words without sound? Or perhaps it really is not happening. How —

But the cowled figures had slipped away.

After they left I tried to fix them in my mind. Abbot Arcrite was a tall man, cheerful, yet grave, with an air of authority. Despite the simplicity of his garb I had the impression that he was a member of the medical team that had saved my life. His companion, Brother Tien was (as I later learned) the chief surgeon of the monastery hospital and had remarkable powers of healing and preservation. Because of these two good men, and others, I was alive.

Three days later I was lying quietly in bed, when I began forming the impression that grandfather was coming to visit me. I thought I could sense the mind of the old man, taut, anxious, yet outwardly impassive, drawing nearer and nearer. Grandfather was coming up the corridor with Abbot Arcrite. There could be no mistake. The surgeon was going to permit a ten-minute visit.

Well, that was good news.

As they came into the room, I held up my hand in greeting and grinned at my grandfather. The old man strode over to the bedside and took my hand. "Yes, Jeremy, yes, yes, it is I. They would not let me see you until now ...." He took a kerchief from his jacket pocket, wiped his eyes, then blew his nose with authority. "They think now you will live. They say I can spend a few minutes with you."

"Ten minutes," warned Abbot Arcrite. "That's all. When I come back, Baron Wolfhead, you will have to leave." He closed the door behind him.

I looked at grandfather's face in wonder and love.

The old man cleared his throat. "I am told you have a little speech problem. So I will have to do the talking. You must listen. Which is only right and proper, because, after all, I am your grandfather and my gray hairs should command a little respect."

I nodded.

"So I guess you want to know everything? What happened, and all events since that night?"

I nodded again.

"Well, Jeremy, it isn't so good." He peered at me earnestly. "But I think you are able to know the worst?"

I looked at him expectantly. I seemed to see the hesitant shadows forming in the old man's mind. I knew what was coming. I knew exactly what he was going to say.

"Ansel and Sligh heard the shots from the direction of the cliff. They scrambled about for their clothes and for their guns, which they finally found, after much useless squealing and wasted motion, for the weapons were over the mantel in the trophy room, where they have always been kept. And being duly clothed and armed, they ran, with great fear and trembling, out toward the cliff rim, and there they found you and Goro. But no Beatra. Beatra was gone. And they carried you back, holding you between them. There was a great deal of blood, and they thought you were dead. But then one of them found a heartbeat, and so they got you into the floater and brought you here to

the abbey medicos. Ansel made many mistakes and got lost several times, but finally he got you here. He has not much skill in driving the floater. But he made great efforts, and you owe your life to him and Sligh."

I picked up the slate and wrote in fair uncial script: "Thank them."

"Yes. Of course. I already have."

I wrote again. "What will happen to Beatra?"

The old man hesitated. "I think she lives." His face was hard, stone-carved. "The elders have met on this, Jeremy. We put the question to the computer. There are several possibilities, alternate explanations. Perhaps you could help us narrow the possibilities. Did you see any of their faces?"

I wrote: "Very pale. Undergrounders, I think."

"Yes, undergrounders. We found skid marks of a floater. They probably came from a tunnel exit a few miles away. Possibly from one of the sea caves."

"Why topside?"

"Like you and Beatra. To see the gods-eye."

"Why take Beatra?"

"The alternate was to kill her. According to the stories, the undergrounders periodically send up raiding parties to take captives for questioning. And sometimes women."

I flinched.

"Our information on such activities goes back some twenty-odd years, when ... a captive ... escaped. Or was perhaps released, and told the Friars all he could about life underground. The undergrounders are said to keep up-to-date on our progress in this way."

I knew the tale. According to the Returner, the entire Federal Government in Washton had gone underground three thousand years ago, just before the Desolation, and the present undergrounders were their descendants. They had named their underground city, Dis, for the vanished District of Columbia. (This name, Dis, some said, had nothng to do with the District of Columbia, but was actually the hell-City of Dis in the great Prophet Dante's *Inferno.*) Once I had thought it all an amusing myth. Well, now I knew it was no fairy tale. I had met their President.

I wrote: "Beatra — alive?"

"There is good reason to think so."

"Rescue?"

"You mean gather a soldier band and go after her?" The old man turned his head away. "Not as easy as you think, Jeremy. I offered twenty gold pieces for each man, trained or untrained. Four volunteered. This was out of the entire shire of New Bollamer. And understand, even if I had offered fifty thousand, it would not be enough. We cannot overcome the underground, just as they cannot overcome us above ground. We live in different worlds. We cannot fight in darkness, and they cannot fight in daylight. There is no good way to grapple with them. One man alone would probably do about as well as an army. Except that he might be killed a little quicker. I thought of going myself. But it wasn't realistic. They would simply kill me. And what good would I be to you, if I were dead? No, Jeremy, remember Beatra, but remembering, you must learn to forget. When you are able to walk about, we

will talk to her people and arrange her funeral. We will consult the stonecutters, and we will design a magnificent cenotaph, in black granite, well-polished. We'll leave room for an inscription, if you care to add one."

I thought to myself, write this for her: She lives!

But now I sensed Abbot Arcrite returning up the corridor. Was there anything I had to tell grandfather? One thing, perhaps. I wrote on the slate: "Bury Goro."

"I did. With honors. He tried."

I nodded. And yet I wondered. With honors? Goro had hesitated. For that split second, Goro had hesitated. Not because he had been afraid, but because he was a dog called upon to attack a man. What would be, then, the ideal guardian animal? It would have to attack my enemies instantly, human or nonhuman. Only a wild creature would do this.

And now Brother Arcrite came in. He and grandfather bowed to each other.

"Time is up," said the abbot.

After they left I lay there thinking. I thought of Beatra, and a great ache grew in my vitals. To relieve the pain I attempted to double up. But it was no use. I thought of Beatra, at table, taking me to work in the floater, sitting with me on the marble benches in front of the fountain in the statuary garden. I saw the glint of fire in her eyes, I heard her laughter like little bells, and the pain became so great that I tried to scream. The effort brought me peace, because I fainted.

A week later I was permitted to take short walks in the garden, and it was here that Abbot Arcrite brought a certain man to meet me.

This was a very curious encounter.

Although I had sensed that Brother Tien and another were about to come around the hedge, I was totally unprepared for what I saw.

Tien's companion was an old man, a shattered husk. He glided into view seated in a chair floater. It stopped at my bench, with Brother Tien close behind. I knew chair floaters existed, but I had never before seen one. The aged and infirm used them on occasion. And sometimes the very rich, out of vanity rather than true need. I could see that, with this man, it was a case of necessity. For he seemed very old indeed. His grey woolen robe covered all of him except his face and hands, which were brown and shriveled, and (it seemed to me then) declared him at least a centenarian. His eyes were closed. His arms and legs, shrunken as twigs in winter, were motionless. His head was supported by a foam plastic collar. Indeed, the only movement to his whole body was the barely perceptible rhythmic rise and fall of his chest.

"Father Phaedrus," said Tien, "Jeremy Wolfhead."

I arose and bowed. And stared.

Father Phaedrus' thought came to me, almost as clearly as if he had spoken. "Yes, my son, I am completely paralyzed."

I blurted mentally, "Then how do you manage the chair floater?"

"The controls respond to my mental command. Brother Tien did everything. He designed the hover chair. He headed the surgical team that blended me and

this chair into a unitary machine. I am Brother Tien's handiwork." He seemed to study me curiously, hungrily, though his eyelids opened not a fraction of an inch. His mind shield was closed tightly, but not enough to hide a seething and frothing behind it.

Abbot Arcrite broke the tension by clearing his throat ostentatiously. "Jeremy, my son," he began, "I have somewhat to say to you. I will start with a bit of history."

Father Phaedrus moved his hover chair opposite my bench and set it down on the turf silently.

"As you know," continued the abbot, "during the Desolation, and after, a number of mutations developed in many of the residual life forms. Human beings were no exception. Most of these mutations were bad and resulted in extinction of the new species. A very few were beneficial and contributed to survival. One such is what the geneticists call the telepathic mutation. The power of speech may be temporarily lost, but the subject can now read minds and can plant his own thoughts in the minds of others. It all takes place because of changes in the parietal lobe of the cerebrum. Sometimes the mutation lies latent. It can be activated overnight, by causes unknown. Or it can be activated by a blow to the parietal area. In your case, it was activated by a blow that broke the skull cap."

The abbot walked over to the little garden table, and we all placed ourselves around it. Father Phaedrus moved his chair to join us.

"The telepathic mutation," continued the abbot, "sometimes — not always — brings with it other possibilities. Now, Brother Tien ...."

The surgeon picked a dry blade of grass from the lawn, broke off a tiny piece, and dropped it on the white marble table top.

"Proceed," said Abbot Arcrite mentally.

Tien stared at the little piece of grass. It jumped upward, then hovered an inch over the table surface. "It is 'psi-movement,'" explained the abbot. "The ancients first named it. There were genetic traces of the trait even in their day."

During all this, Father Phaedrus sat immobile and mute in his hover chair at Arcrite's side. But I knew he was completely absorbed in the proceedings, and especially in my reaction.

Aside from his nearly total physical disability, I noted a further disconcerting aspect of Father Phaedrus. He was intrusive. He continually, *eagerly*, sought access to the innermost reaches of my mind. Out of respect for his condition, and in view of the obvious difference in our ages, I did not admonish him for this. I simply clamped down my mind shield as best I could. And finally, he retreated, but unabashed.

I addressed a mental question to Brother Tien. "What is the maximum weight you can lift?"

"About five pounds, but it has to be balanced, to provide a vortex."

Tien walked over to the pathway and picked up a handful of tiny pebbles. He put them on the table. Two by two, they left the table surface and began spinning in the air about a common center.

I was fascinated. My eyes shifted back and forth from his face, now beginning to sweat, and then to the pebble vortex, which was now a foot off the table and spinning with a loud whine.

I wondered whether I dared ask Brother Tien a question while the vortex was in motion. He answered me mentally, before I even framed the words in my mind. "Yes. It can move laterally." The spinning mass moved slowly away from the table and hovered in the air over a bed of lilies.

"It could be dangerous," I mused.

"Very. Watch that toadstool."

The vortex moved over a large white amanita, paused a moment, then plunged toward it. There was a brief flurry of moist flying particles and a sound like a circular saw chewing into a knot of wood.

And then the dust settled, and I saw a declivity in the ground where the turf had been dug away, a full inch deep and six inches in diameter.

I stared, first at the hole, then at Brother Tien.

Abbot Arcrite said to me (and I detected grim overtones in his statement): "You are wondering if you can do that. We don't know. In any case, the power comes in stages, and there is much training involved."

I had a sudden vision. There was that harsh albino face, and here came this pebbly whirlwind, churning into it.

"If you wish," said Arcrite, "we can give you a preliminary test."

"Now!" I formed the word in my mind.

"Yes," said Abbot Arcrite. His tone seemed grave.

"Yes," said Father Phaedrus. He seemed downright grim.

Why the lack of enthusiasm, I wondered. Wasn't this their idea, in the first place?

"You will see, and understand," said the abbot cryptically.

And that was all I could get from them.

5. *The Stress Test*

"We can start here and now," said Abbot Arcrite. Brother Tien plucked a grass tip from the sward at his feet and dropped it to the table top. "Concentrate," said the abbot. "Try to lift it from the table."

I leaned forward. I concentrated. I willed that it lift. I commanded it. But the bit of green did not move. Again I tried. My brows corrugated, and I broke out in a sweat. For Beatra's sake, I thought, you will rise.

But the stupid thing simply lay there.

Arcrite touched minds briefly with Tien and Father Phaedrus.

I sensed words forming in the abbot's mind. "It is not necessarily determinative. He is not under stress."

"Stress?" I asked mentally.

Tien and Arcrite looked away.

Finally Father Phaedrus said, "There is a definitive test for vortectic power. You could undertake the stress determination." A shimmering gray-red danger signal overlay his thought.

"I gather," I said in my mind, "that if I have this talent, it will certainly come forth during what you call the stress test?"

"Yes," agreed Abbot Arcrite.

"And if I don't have it?"

And now they were all deliberately shielding their thoughts from me. Curtains went up. I caught only glimpses of things. Of a cell-like room. Of something deadly whizzing toward me. Of a shield. Crunch. But *what* had crunched? What would happen to me? Suddenly I did not like any of it.

The abbot looked at Father Phaedrus for a moment. I caught traces of a mental exchange. The paralytic was adamant. The abbot turned back to me. "We can show you," he said finally. "You can then choose for yourself. We can take you through it, step by step. You will be free to stop it at any time."

"*Almost* any time," corrected Brother Tien.

Father Phaedrus said nothing. I knew he was "watching" me intently.

"I would like to try it," I said. "When do I start?"

"Now, if you like," said the abbot. "We need only walk across the square to the studio."

And so we did.

The studio was a smallish room, but well-lit. At one end was an iron scaffolding. We went over to it. It was then that I noticed the straps on the iron bars. And the dark red stains at the foot of the structure.

They were bloodstains, and they cried out to me. A man had recently died here. And others before him. What had led the owners of this precious fluid to risk it so readily? Readily? Perhaps they, like myself, had second thoughts at the end. Perhaps in those last milliseconds, when they saw the crashing face of disaster, they cried out, No! No! But too late. Ready or not, they died. For this seems to be the nature of death. We risk it. We seek it out. We welcome brushes with it. We court it. But when it turns to embrace us, we cry out, "Not yet!"

I tried hard to swallow, but found I could not.

Now this showed a sudden sinister side to the Brothers that I had never before suspected. I suddenly realized that all of them had to pass this test before they were admitted to the Brotherhood. And that not all candidates were successful.

"I do not wish to become a Brother," I said bluntly. "I have other plans. With all respect," I added hastily.

"You need not become one of us," said Abbot Arcrite. "And we respect your own personal plans. You know that men have died in taking the stress test. You have wondered why they would risk their lives for so paltry a treasure as the vortectic talent. We can now tell you a little. Our prime directive was stated for us three hundred years ago: destroy the gods-eye. How? Through the power of the vortex. And this means that, through the centuries, we have maintained a pool of vortectic talent."

Were they all mad? "But *why*?" I demanded, "Why ask men to risk death for so futile a goal? Even if you were able, why would you want to destroy that perfectly harmless orbiting light speck?"

"If we do not, we fear that it will eventually kill you, and us, and every living creature on the face of the earth," said the abbot simply.

This was too much. "And how do you propose to destroy it?" I asked.

"It is controlled from underground," said the abbot. "Someone will have to go there."

Aha! Their interest in me suddenly began to make sense. But I wanted no part of their game. The gods-eye wasn't bothering me. It had been inert for as long as men could remember, and it wasn't likely to change.

Father Phaedrus spoke to me. "Jeremy, my son," he said bluntly, "I think you must try the test, even though you fail, and die."

There it was, laid out in the open. I felt unable to argue with him.

"Well," I said, "at least I can start."

The abbot shrugged his shoulders. "Strapping in is the first step. You can still discontinue after that — up to a point."

My heart was pounding. "Strap me in."

Tien buckled the straps around my arms, legs, and waist. I could not move a fraction of an inch in any direction. "There is a shield, isn't there?" I demanded.

"You read well, Jeremy," said the abbot. "Yes, there is a shield." Already, Brother Tien was wheeling up a big metal plate. He positioned it in front of me, so that it covered, or seemed to cover, all of my body except my eyes.

"The protection is illusory," said the abbot dryly. "There is a tiny hole in the plate directly in front of your heart. Lights off, please."

My heart began to throb even faster. Something, a deadly missle of some kind, was aimed straight at my heart. What kind of test was this?

Father Phaedrus broke into my thoughts. "Jeremy," he stated brusquely, "do not be afraid. You *must* do this, and you *can* do it."

I smiled crookedly. Nothing was aimed at *his* heart.

"You are wrong, Jeremy," he said.

The room was plunged into semi-darkness. A pencil of light stabbed toward me from the opposite end of the room "Quite harmless," said the abbot. "Simply for purposes of alignment. The light beam must go through the hole."

"Next," said Tien, "we release the dust curtain."

Two yards in front of me a coin-size disk of bright light appeared to intersect the little light beam. And then I realized that a thin curtain of dust was falling from a container in the ceiling down to a gutter in the floor. The light pencil was simply reflecting from the dust particles at the plane of intersection. The disk was the reflected intersection. And now I had it — or most of it. "A precision crossbow fires a thin metal arrow through the dust," I said. "If nothing is done, it passes through the hole in the shield and enters my heart."

"True," said the abbot.

"How do I make it not pass through the hole in the shield?"

"If you have the talent," said the abbot, "your subconscious mind will take over and act by reflex. It will instantly develop a dust vortex where the arrow must pass through the light disk. The vortex will deflect the arrow very slightly, enough to make it miss the hole in the shield. It will then break harmlessly against the shield."

"And if I don't deflect the arrow?"

"Your question is of course superfluous."

"Who releases the arrow?" I asked.

"You do."

Raw, I thought to myself. Quite raw. By my own hand. "Suppose I am successful," I said to them. "Suppose I find I have the talent. Will I have to wait for another life-and-death situation before I can use it again?"

"No, once established, you will be able to call it forth at will."

It was something to ponder. Yet, I think I had already made up my mind. Perhaps I did not tell them instantly for the simple reason that I wanted another thirty seconds of life. Yes, life was sweet, and if I were about to take leave of it, I wanted my reasons laid out in good array.

Their motives, their reasons, were not the same as mine. These three were playing a deeper game. To them, and for their own private reasons, something involving the gods-eye, it was apparently essential that I go underground; and to do this and survive there, I had to pass their tests. But I was totally unmoved by their reasons. I had to have my own.

I was going after Beatra. I knew that, and they knew it. And we all knew I couldn't take any kind of weapon. Nothing of wood or metal. Nothing of any artificial structure. We knew, from the reports of the Returner, that the undergrounders had detectors in their sea-cave entrance that would detect such things and sound an immediate alarm. I would be found and killed within the hour of my attempted entry. No weapons. I would have to enter that dismal place stripped absolutely naked. I would need this talent — if in fact I had it. It was my only chance. For it would be a living weapon, a thing I could carry with me, in my mind, on call at all times.

I had to know. Father Phaedrus knew me well. I had to try, even though I died.

If I did not have the talent, then Beatra would die, or perhaps worse would be done to her. But I would be dead and know nothing of it. (Unless what the godcallers say is true, that we would meet again in some other kind of existence, after death. But what that could be, I have no idea.) If I failed with the arrow, death would be quick and almost painless. Not that I am afraid of pain. I have been hurt before, in hunting trips. I have been clawed, and I have had some broken bones. But it had been done to me by hunted things, and perhaps I had no excuse or complaint. Well, now I was the hunted thing, the cornered quarry.

I gave the mental command: "Hand me the release button." Abbot Arcrite handed me a fist-sized thing with a little plunger sticking out. There was no cord. It worked by radio.

I did not think any more.

I peered fixedly at that wavering disk of light in the dust curtain, and I pushed the plunger firmly with my thumb.

Time stood still — almost. The dust curtain seemed fixed in space. It was not falling any more. At least, I could not see any movement. And then a tiny stem of metal slowly pierced the lighted circle of the dust curtain. I studied it with a certain detached curiosity. It

kept coming. Now some three inches had passed through the curtain. How long is it going to be, I wondered. It will be all day before it reaches me. Nothing to worry about, really.

And now I could see the end of it emerging. I saw the beginning tips of the three stabilizer vanes on its tail.

It was going to get through, and I had done nothing!

I now experienced a strange sensory rhapsody. I saw Beatra. She was dancing on the stone flags of our bedroom. I could hear the soft swish of her sandals on the hard polished surface. She was singing, and I heard her. It was springtime, and a soft breeze was blowing through the curtains in the bay window. I smelled the tantalizing odor of wild cherry pollen. Did this mean that I was about to die? But if I died, who would rescue her? It must not be! Mentally, I shrieked, "Beatra!"

My mind began churning. I tried to cry out, but nothing came out of my throat. But something within my mind *fixed* on the dust on the right-hand side of the vanes. The dust there began to whirl. I could see the little eddy. It was spinning, faster and faster. It made the fletches wobble. The head of the arrow was kicked out of its straight-line path. And here it came. Time was speeding up.

Ping!

I knew where it had hit. A good five inches to the left of the hole in the shield. And then it had rebounded.

I collapsed. I hung there in my straps, gurgling.

But I had it. I knew I had it.

I was ecstatic but exhausted. But perhaps not totally exhausted. They had promised me that I could call up my new gift at will.

My eyes were closed. I left them that way. I knew the dust curtain had stopped falling. I knew there was an accumulation of dust on the studio floor. As I hung there slack in the straps, I began to gather up that dust, a pinch at a time, balancing each grain by another grain, one after another, and I began to make them whirl. Faster and faster. The Brothers watched impassively. I knew what the particles were made of. A type of feldspar. Very hard, very abrasive.

I lifted the vortex. I made it move toward me, a thing alive. I changed its shape at will. It was a sphere. It was a cylinder. As it came up to my mental shield, I transformed it into a disk, whining, lethal. I could make it do anything I wanted. I could make it cut the straps that held me. I could make it cut the iron bars of the scaffold.

I sensed alarm in the minds of Abbot Arcrite and Brother Tien. But Father Phaedrus seemed to be laughing.

But I would not be that destructive.

Their minds relaxed.

However: I dropped the arrow-starter from my right hand. Before it had fallen to my waist, the whirling disk had sliced it in half.

The abbot released me. Enough for one day.

And now Phaedrus seemed suddenly to collapse in his hover chair, and it sat down hard on the stone flooring. His companions rushed over in alarm. From his flickering mind, I caught a garbled mental message: "I'll steal that

floater ... down the river ... I'll get away from them yet ... where does the river lead ... I'm falling a...! Ahhh ...!"

Poor Phaedrus. The strain of rising from his sickbed had been too much for him.

But the scene was not prolonged. Abbot Arcrite was already wheeling him out of the building. I did not see Father Phaedrus again for several weeks.

As the days passed, my vortex training continued.

"We used dust initially because you could see it and feel it," said Abbot Arcrite. "Also, because the telekinetic effect increases in proportion to the number of particles and in inverse proportion to their size. And, yet, there are much smaller and much more numerous particles available. They surround us, in fact. I mean ambient air. We can do a number of things with these tiny molecules. In the first place, suppose you need a light source. Well, now, what is light? It is photons, a radiant form of energy, produced when an electron slips outward from one orbit to another." He drew the blind and turned off the light. "Permit me to demonstrate." I sat there quietly, and in a matter of seconds a pale blue sphere formed in the air in front of and above the abbot. A soft glow flickered over the room, then faded as the globe disappeared. "Try it," said the abbot.

I concentrated. I saw, as though through some great microscope, countless tiny dumbbells swimming in front of my eyes. Without thinking about it, I knew they were individual oxygen and nitrogen molecules. I moved in deeper. I concentrated on one single molecule. I sensed eight tiny charged particles stationed in mysterious shells about a comparatively massive central nucleus. Oxygen. I poured energy into one of the tiny particles in the outermost shell, and it shifted into a shell even farther away from the nucleus, and simultaneously it released a sparklet. One photon. And now I was doing the same thing to dozens of other molecules. Hundreds. Oxygen and nitrogen. Millions. They had no number. They whirled, and a luminous sphere filled the room with light, so much light that I had to close my eyes, and the abbot held his hands over his face. "It is enough," he said.

Day after day the training continued. I learned how to make a small whirlwind that could suck things into its spinning recesses and carry them from one end of the room to the other. They taught me how a vortex can be a heat pump, heat being drained away from the center and released at the periphery. In another experiment I froze a glass of water in thirty seconds. Using the same technique, I connected two lengths of copper wire to a small electric motor. One length I heated with the outside of a spinning sphere of air and the other length I cooled with the inside of a second spinning air sphere. The system actually developed a small electric current, and the electric motor hummed merrily. The Brothers looked at it, then at each other, in wondering approval. They had never seen an engineering application of the

vortex. I wished that grandfather had been there to see it. But perhaps it was just as well that he wasn't there. He would not have believed it anyway!

6. *Beatra's Funeral*

We made the arrangements with Godcaller Hander. I had wanted a simple ceremony, something suitable for her kinsmen and mine, held at the village kirk. But her father and brothers would have none of it. They wanted a great thing starting on the square, with all the villagers, and then moving to their family dead-acre. It was not a thing to quarrel about, so I gave in.

I had already seen the headstone. Grandfather had ordered it from the stone cutter, polished black granite. The legend read

Beatra Wolfhead
Born 1880
Died 1900

Like most legends, it mingled truth and fiction.

Grandfather also provided the coffin. It was a heavy, ornate thing, trimmed in silver and ivory, and I think he had been saving it for himself. It seemed illogical to bury it empty. But that was the way the thing went. So far as her family was concerned, she was dead, and it was my fault. If she weren't in that box, she might as well be.

They carried the coffin from grandfather's warehouse by truckfloater. And when Godcaller Hander saw how heavy it was, he knew right away that no number of shoulders, no matter how strong and willing, could march away with it to the dead-acre. So they left it on the floater and simply laid a purple satin drape over it.

Hander started things by invoking a blessing on her immortality and then asked God to forgive me for letting her be taken away. During all this, Beatra's father did not bow his head in grief and humility. Instead, he glared at me. Well, perhaps he was justified. I hung my bandaged head. I should have expected the danger, and I should never have exposed her to it. At the very least, I should have carried a weapon. And so it had come to this.

The Godcaller now lined up the forty mourners, got them in reasonable tune, and off we went, down the hill, through the village, and off through the countryside. Beatra's family followed the coffin-floater; grandfather and I were next, and then the ragtag collection of villagers, who would not miss any of it for the world.

It was the longest three miles I have ever journeyed. The sun was bright; there was a slight breeze, and it shook loose a fog of pollen from the wild cherry trees that lined the road. I will never forget the scent of those trees. It took me back to the night of the winter ball.

At the grave site we regrouped. Grandfather and I took one side of the open pit, Beatra's family on the other. The Godcaller stood at one end with his psalter, and the gravedigger at the other with his shovel. It was all quite insane and a waste of time and emotion, for Beatra was alive. I knew this. She was certainly not in that heavy teakwood box, and none of this could have the slightest effect on her. This was for her family. I suppose they had a right to have this (they thought) final

chapter of her lifebook read to them.

While the Godcaller read his psalm, grandfather and I on one side, and her father and brother on the other, lowered the coffin into the grave with the heavy hempen ropes. Then we pulled the ropes back out and tossed them to the gravedigger. He thrust his shovel into the waiting pile of dirt and tossed a shovelful on the waiting box. There was a faint hollow ring. Then again, and again. Then he waited while Beatra's father pulled his dagger from its sheath and walked around to my side of the grave.

I pulled off my tunic, baring myself to the waist.

He looked at me grimly, without sorrow or forgiveness, then made the first cut of the cross upon my chest. The blood spurted. I did not move a muscle. "Carry her memory thus," he intoned. Then he made the second cut to complete the cross. More blood. Quite a bit more than was necessary, but I was not inclined to complain. "She dies barren," he said, "as barren as that box." He wiped the blade on his breeches, then walked away.

In that moment I regained my voice. I found myself whispering. "No! She lives!"

7. *The Abbot Advises*

The day after the funeral, Brother Tien took my bandages off. The abbot made it a point to be present. He sent a thought to me. "We know that you are determined to seek your wife underground. We have certainly encouraged you. Nevertheless, we ask you to consider — are you doing this as a socially acceptable means of suicide, or will you plan your journey with the greatest possible skill and with a thorough understanding of the obstacles to be overcome?"

That was too complicated for me. "I'm going down, and I will bring Beatra out or die." I looked across the room at the polished metal mirror. The cut of my hair was pretty crude, and I could see and feel a bristly stubble over my forehead, where they had evidently shaved my skull before sawing it open. There was a slight declivity there. That was where they had chopped out a bit of my cerebral cortex, inserted a protective metal plate, and pulled the skin back over it. But otherwise I could detect no damage. Physically, thanks to the Brothers, I had pulled through beautifully. I suddenly remembered my manners. "Abbot Arcrite, I would welcome any help or advice you can give me."

"You answer well. Let us consider then. To avoid instant detection, you will have to look like the undergrounders. Your skin is tanned. You will have to lighten it to a pale white. Brother Tien will provide the necessary bleaching oils. Start using them daily, after your morning shower." He studied my yellow hair and blue eyes. "Satisfactory, although the eyes may be somewhat small by underground standards. But there's no help for it." He paused. "And now we have a serious problem, yet not one beyond solution. It will be dark underground. The people there have adjusted to the darkness over the three thousand years since the Desolation. Their pupils are much larger than ours. But the dim lighting can offer

serious problems for one of us. Brother Tien will explain this to you."

"Yes," said Tien mentally. "According to the Returner, they have three levels of lighting, or lack of it. First, they have, what are to them, 'high-intensity' lights. These are ceiling lights in their administrative buildings, many of their homes, street corners, search beams on their floaters, and so on. The degree of illumination is roughly equivalent to twilight or dusk here.

"Second, most of the street ceilings, as well as many houses and rooms, are coated with a fluorescent pigment. It receives invisible radiation energy from some very mysterious but unknown source, penetrating through yards, aye, perhaps even miles of rock strata and walls, and the pigment converts this energy into visible radiation. After an initial adjustment, you should be able to make out the shapes of gross objects, such as vehicles, furniture, people, and so on. But you will not be able to distinguish faces nor to read print. You may find it somewhat like starlight on a clear moonless night. To the undergrounders, however, this gives ample light to conduct their daily affairs. By this light, they can drive their vehicles, read books, till their fields, and aim a gun at you. You would not be able to do any of this, except that you *might* be able to manage a floater in light traffic."

I was puzzled. "But why not simply make a light-ball? That would take care of any degree of darkness."

Brother Tien laughed shortly. "And announce your presence for miles around?" He continued. "Finally, there is total darkness. There is no wall pigment or other light source available. This is the general case in the outlying grottoes and caverns and the corridors that link them into the city. There is only one known species of life capable of 'seeing' in such darkness. This is the dire wolf, a mutant that has evolved only since the Desolation. It can 'see' to some extent by means of thermal differentiation in the infrared."

I looked at him in wonder. A dire wolf? Next to the great white bear, the deadliest creature in North America. To penetrate into the semilighted areas of the underground city, I needed a dire wolf. Not just any dire wolf. This one would have to be as obedient as a dog and capable of telepathic communication.

They had followed my thoughts. "Yes, telepathic communication," said the abbot. "Why do yu think we saved that bit of your cranial tissue?"

"The perfect implant for a wolf brain," confirmed Tien.

I was amazed. And puzzled.

"Would I 'talk' mentally to the wolf the same way I'm communicating with you two now?"

"Very much the same," said Brother Tien. "The difference would be that your thoughts, as well as those of the animal, would be coded through the transplant. For example, suppose you want to say to the wolf, 'Kill.' Your own brain breaks down the command into its components of alpha, beta, and gamma waves. These are sent to the transplant, which reconstitutes them into messages to the appropriate areas of the lupine cortex, where they are translated into wolf language. When

the animal talks to you, the process is simply reversed."

"Nothing to it really," said the abbot firmly.

"All you need is a wolf," said Brother Tien.

I was already making plans.

8. *The Wolf*

That very afternoon I took the floater and made north to the Delara Valley. I had heard rumors that a trapper had captured, perhaps a year ago, a pair of dire wolf cubs, one male, one female, and was raising them as though they were dogs. The report was that he lived alone and hated human company but seemed to need companionship, especially during the long winters.

Perhaps I should explain about those winters. Our scientists tell us that after the Desolation it became very cold all over the world, because of the great palls of dust which for years and years blotted out the sun. In those days it snowed winter and summer, and the snows did not melt, but piled into great thick sheets of ice all over the land. And then the ice began to *flow*, but slowly, like cold honey. And it flowed into the river valleys, pushing rocks and dirt and mud ahead of it. All of that happened a long time ago, and the ice is gone now, at least in the New Bollamer area. Nevertheless, I have hunted in the Delara Valley, and I can tell you that there is still ice there, even in summer. There is a long mass of ice in the middle of the valley, a thousand yards thick. A river runs under it, into a long lake shaped like a finger. Grandfather, who has never been this far north, says that the ice melts more and more each year and that the ice face retreats up the valley more and more and that some day it will be melted altogether. Well, of course grandfather is a scientist, and he can say what he wants, and there will be no one who will disagree with him, at least to his face. Certainly not I. But one thing is sure. In winter, that valley must be the coldest place on our northern seaboard. And snow? I have hunted there at times when I have had to shoe-shoe over snow ten yards thick, and more falling. And if you are shut up in a cabin on Lake Delara over the winter, you might be glad for the companionship of even a dire wolf. So, I can understand that trapper.

I dropped the floater in a clearing by the skinning house and hit the horn with my thumb. The cacophonous blast echoed horridly back and forth between the valley walls.

The cabin door opened a few inches. A gruff voice called out: "Stop that racket or I'll blow your head off!" And indeed, a rifle barrel moved forward out of the door crack, pointed with some accuracy at my head. "State your business." he shouted.

"I'd like to buy something," I called out.

"Buy something? Well, now ...."

Trapper Thornhouse stepped out on the rickety porch. He was followed by two of the handsomest wolves I have ever seen. One way gray, about twenty-seven inches at the shoulder. Probably the male. The other was white and somewhat smaller. The female. At that instant I found a name for her. For,

even as the poet Virgil had guided Dante to the City of Dis in the great prophecy, so would the wolf Virgil guide me in my journey down to Dis. I knew immediately that I would leave here with her.

And now I could read the trapper's thoughts clearly. A patchwork of mingled suspicion, curiosity, and greed. He reasoned that I needed something badly and was willing to pay. How much could he get from me?

There was going to be trouble. I had already attached my narco-dart gun to my thumbnail, but I had wanted to save the dart for Virgil. I'd have to sedate her to get her into the porto-cage. I didn't want to waste the dart on this idiot. But there were other ways to handle Thornhouse. I noted the small stones, leaves, dirt, and debris scattered about the clearing. I wasn't worried.

I stepped slowly and carefully out of the floater and onto the ground.

The wolves began to growl. The sounds came from deep within their throats, and it was a fearsome thing.

"Quite, friends," said the trapper. "Let's see what he has to say."

I pointed at Virgil. "I'd like to buy her. How much?"

He rubbed his chin and studied me, the floater, and then looked down at Virgil. The wolves stayed with him and stood at his knee, still as statues. I couldn't keep my eyes off her. How beautiful she was!

I already knew what he was going to say. "Can't sell her, sonny. She's part of my little family. So I guess I can't help you, and I guess you had better skedaddle." (He knew I wasn't about to leave.)

I pulled a leather bag from my pocket. I dangled it against my other palm. He heard the clink of metal. I loosened the drawstring and took out a handful of gold pieces. "All this for the female," I said. His eyes widened.

He rubbed his chin again. Contact with the grease, grime, and soup drippings in that unlovely felted mass seemed to increase his brainpower. He shook his head. "Is *that* all?" he demanded. "Just gold? I can't spend gold here. Not a trading village within twenty miles."

With an eye on his rifle barrel, I backed carefully to the cockpit of the floater and brought out a steel bow and case of fitted arrows. I handed them to him. He hefted the bow appreciatively.

"Stainless metal," I said. "Worth a lot of money. Good pull. Silent arrows. You can make a second kill."

"What else?"

"That's all I have."

A low and cunning thought was forming in his mean little skull. "Throw in the floater, and you can have her."

"Don't be stupid, trapper. How would I get the wolf out?"

He brought his rifle up again. I estimated that the bullet would enter about midway between my eyes. Grandfather would never find my body here. First my parents, then Beatra, then me. It would be too much for him.

But perhaps it wouldn't come to that.

Thornhouse was still ruminating, and I read him clearly. He was trying to make up his mind whether to tell me to leave everything and walk out of his valley, or whether he should kill me.

What he really wanted was the floater. If he had a floater he could trap all the way up into Canda. Candian pelts brought twice as much money as local skins. Also, it would simplify things all around to kill me. That way I couldn't return with friends breathing vengeance. Meanwhile he would hide the floater back in the glen, and if anyone came looking for me, he would claim ignorance.

So he would kill me. Now. Safely. Without complications.

His finger tightened on his trigger. But he was not nearly fast enough.

Time slowed for me again. I summoned up a whirlpool of pebbles, dirt, dust, leaves, whatever there was within a radius of several yards around the trio. They were blinded. My would-be executioner screamed, dropped his rifle, and tried to cover his eyes with his hands. One of the animals bolted out of the whirl stream and fled in a gray streak toward the cabin. And a flash of white burst out of the storm, aimed straight at my throat. I didn't have time to be elated at her readiness to attack. I fired my dart at her in midair, and she dropped at my feet.

I let the dust settle around the feet of the trapper. He was a comic sight. His clothing hung about him in shreds. He was now nearly bald and almost clean-shaven. A single tuft of hair stuck up from the top of his head, and it was twisted into a tight spiral.

I laughed at him.

Virgil had collapsed and was in the act of rolling on her side. The dart was still stuck in her chest. It had done its work well, but she would be paralyzed for only a couple of minutes.

I picked up the trapper's rifle, broke out the electros, and dropped the weapon at his feet. I put the bag of gold back in my pocket, retrieved the bow and arrow, and put them all back in the floater-pit. Next, I got out the folding pen, set it up quite casually, and then went over and picked up my new friend. Ah, how rich and thick was her fur! Even in her dazed condition she managed a throaty growl. I smiled.

I got her stowed away, climbed into the floater without a backward glance at my dazed host, and headed south.

9. *A Transplant*

"The wolf brain is basically the same as any other mammalian brain — including yours," said Brother Tien. "Certain features are of course accentuated, while others are repressed. Areas dealing with scent, hearing, and sight are enlarged, as might be expected. Words and sentences, which you have in neighboring areas of the temporal, parietal, and frontal lobes, have no counterpart areas in the brain of the dire wolf. Also, in the wolf there is little provision for mental process in depth. The frontal lobe, for example, is minuscule."

Virgil was stretched out on her belly on the operating table. Her head was strapped, chin down, against a wooden block support. She was covered with a white drape. There was a square hold in the drape over the top of her skull, which had been shaved.

They had encased me in sterile gown and mask, and they were letting me watch the operation.

"We have never done it before,"

said Tien. "However, it is fairly simple, both in theory and in technique. It ought to work."

The nurse handed him a scalpel and he sliced a capital H on the animal's forehead. Then he pulled back the two skin flaps and fastened them. I winced.

He got to work with an audio drill and cut through the bone. The nurse handed him a sponge. He daubed at the blood and threw the sponge on the floor.

Now he folded back a flap of bone. He motioned for me to take a look. "That is the dura mater — a protective sheath covering the brain. Right underneath this area should be the juncture of the hemispherical fissure with the central fissure. Sort of a widening at the crossroads. That is where we will implant the bit of your own brain tissue that we saved from your operation." He motioned again to the nurse, and she wheeled up the glass culture tank which contained my transplant material. I looked at it with awe and respect. I did not recognize it as any part of me, brain or otherwise. And it did not really look as though it was living matter. It wasn't pulsing or bubbling or breathing, or anything like that. I couldn't see any blood vessels in it — not even capillaries. It looked to be a blob of irregular pale-yellow jelly.

And now Virgil's meninges were cut, and Brother Tien was estimating the size and shape of her cranial fissure. He made up his mind instantly. He fished into the culture tank with a forceps, drew out my bit of tissue, and began to carve it with scissors and scalpel. When he had something that satisfied him, he dropped it into the hole in her head. He pulled it out once, took a snip at one edge, then dropped it in again. I could not see his mouth, but I could tell that he was smiling. It must have been a perfect fit.

"Close up," he told the nurse.

I heaved a sigh of relief.

Virgil's anesthetic wore off during the afternoon, and after that she was hellishly sick. She tried to vomit, but there was nothing in her stomach. She scraped at the bandages a little, but finally she just gave up and lay on her pallet, bleary-eyed and panting.

"She's recovering nicely," Tien assured me. "Very strong heartbeat, good respiration. Can you 'read' anything?"

"Just fuzzy snatches, meaningless. No images. No words."

"About as expected. Let's leave her along for the time being. We can look in on her tomorrow morning. Central will keep a visue-monitor on her meanwhile."

"You go on, Brother. I will stay with her."

He smiled. "As you wish. I will have the nurse bring you a cot."

In the early morning hours I heard a stirring behind the bars of Virgil's pen. I raised from the cot on an elbow and looked over. I could see her, standing motionless, glaring through the bars at me. And now she was making words, slowly, painfully, one at a time.

"You ... great ... lump ... of ... goat ... dung."

I sat bolt upright. I found a sudden impulse to open her cage and hug her around her beautiful neck. But better

sense prevailed. "How do you feel, Virgil?" I asked politely.

"Let ... out." She let me see a vision of a rabbit bounding ahead of her, twisting and turning. And the final leap. Next, she was up on a hilltop. It was night, very dark, and she was howling. It was a prolonged, eerie sound. It made my flesh creep. From somewhere in the distance there was an answering cry.

I focused slowly, carefully, inside her brain, and began forming sentences there. "You want to go back home, of course. I don't blame you. Well, you can. I will take you. But first, Virgil, you must do something for me. I need your help."

"Why do you call me Virgil?"

"There was once a great prophet, Dante Alighieri, who visited a great and terrible underground city, and a man named Virgil was his guide."

"You're crazy. I'm no man. I'm no guide, and I've never been underground."

"You'll learn as we go along, Virgil. Accept it."

"Forget it."

"Then you will live and die in a cage."

She was silent a moment. The little piece of my cerebral cortex had introduced an unaccustomed element of logic in her mental process. She required extra time to deal with it. "You would do that to me?"

"Yes."

"Even though I have done you no harm?"

"Yes. You have to understand, Virgil, that I am willing to cause a great many people much trouble, pain, and inconvenience just to rescue my wife." I gave her a mental step-by-step scenario of how Beatra and I had gone to the cliff edge to see the gods-eye, and how the undergrounders had appeared, and how I had been shot, and how Beatra had been carried away. I explained the darkness that awaited us underground, and how I would need her eyes in my attempt to rescue Beatra.

She thought about all this for several minutes. Finally she said, "This Beatra, is she pretty?"

"You know she is."

"But there are lots of other pretty females around."

"None of them are Beatra."

She made an extraordinary statement. "You are going underground to find a woman who is probably dead. And even if she is alive, you will be dead before you get within twenty miles of her. And even if you find her, you will never get her out. You are not a brave man. You are simply a very stupid man. I am cursed forever to carry the brain tissue of a fool."

It was my own bit of brain speaking in her!

I said, "You will not help me?"

"No."

I got up and turned to go. My hand was on the door when she whimpered. "Jeremy."

"Well?"

"You are not going to leave me here?"

"As soon as you are completely well, you will be placed in a zoo. You will be fed scraps of slaughtered cattle, and children will come to see you on Sundays and they will point at you."

"Suppose I went with you and led

you around in the dark. What else would I be expected to do?"

"When we are hiding, you will have to keep watch. Also, your ears are sharper than mine, and so is your sense of smell, not to mention your teeth. You may have to kill a few people."

"*We* will be killed."

I took a step toward the door.

"I will go with you," she said.

I smiled. "Virgil, you are thinking that as soon as we get into the open, you can break away and head for the woods, killing me first if necessary. Well, my lovely friend, forget it. We will never be in the open. You and I will be dropped into the surf that faces a long line of cliffs. In these cliffs are caves, called The Grottoes, that can be entered at low tide. If the sea crocodiles don't get us, we should be able to swim into one of the grottoes, climb up somewhere inside, and find our way down, down, down ... into the bowels of the earth. You will never have a chance to make a run for it. You have to go down with me, help my find Beatra, then return with me. After that, I will take you back to your valley and release you."

"I will go, but I don't promise I won't try to escape."

"Nor would I believe you if you did promise."

10. *An Early Rising*

It was early in the morning, a few days later, while I was still in temporary quarters in one of the monastery cells near the animal pens, that I was awakened by a brisk pounding on my door.

"Enter," I called out groggily. I sat up on the edge of the bed. "Ah, Brother Tien?"

We both slipped into telepathic communication. It was faster and less ambiguous.

"I am here," said the Friar, "because we think you do not have much time. The wolf is not completely ready, and you really should have additional vortectic training. It is regrettable."

It was cold dawn, and I was still rubbing the sleep from my eyes. But I was awake enough to be instantly alarmed.

"Beatra? Is she in greater danger?"

"We have no knowledge of her, and no way to obtain any. You must know that. It's you we're thinking of, and your vortectic powers in particular."

"What's wrong?"

"We have reason to believe that your vortectic powers will soon vanish. Obviously, any attempt to rescue your wife must be undertaken while you are in full possession of your powers."

"Why didn't you tell me this sooner?"

"We learned it only an hour ago from Father Phaedrus. His time is upon him."

I understood. Phaedrus was dying and had begun to prophesy. And he must have said something about me. "How long do I have?"

"Please wait," he said. "First, I want to explain something." He pulled out a map. "Look at this."

I studied the map. I recognized the shore line, New Bollamer, Horeshoe Bay, and other local points. Somewhat to the south, in northern Ginia, perhaps a dozen miles from the coast, was a

point surrounded by wavering concentric circles. I estimated the circumferences to be roughly a mile apart.

"The circles," said the physician-monk, "are lines of equal vortectic strength, as measured by the actual weights of a pebble vortex that a given Brother has been able to lift. Mile by mile, as we come inward toward this point" — he indicated the center of the circles — "our strength increases, and it is greatest directly over the center area. We speculate that there is something underground there, some great radiating force, that supplies the energy that we use for our little tricks. Perhaps it's the same mysterious power source that fluoresces their wall pigments and lights their city." He rolled the map up. "But what it is, or how it works, we haven't the vaguest concept." He looked at me and saw that I was attending carefully. "This power source, whatever it may be, has had, we think, three quite remarkable external consequences. Firstly, it is accelerating the earth's precession, which is to say, the conical revolution of the axis of rotation. Before the Desolation, the earth's axis pointed almost at Polaris. Owing to precession, the axis direction was moving in a slow circle toward Vega, in the constellation of Lyra. Normally, we would need another nine thousand years to reach the Vega orientation. But this great underground force has speeded up the sweep, and we are now already into Lyra. Secondly, the force is slowing the daily rotation of the earth. The earth now needs almost exactly three hundred and sixty days for a complete revolution around the sun. Before the Desolation, it was three hundred sixty-five plus. Thirdly, the temblors and earthquakes are milder here than at any other locale on the eastern seaboard. They are very likely held in check by this same strange force."

The concepts of earthquakes and precession and slowing the year to three hundred and sixty days I did not completely understand, nor did I see that they had anything to do with my approaching journey. But the essential thing was all too clear. Our vortectic powers were derived from a great energy source, far underground, and it would soon cease to function.

He said, "And so you ask, how long do you have. Let us consider. The Year of the Gray Snow yields to the Year of the Wolf, and the Year of the Wolf yields to the Year of the Green Leaves. It has long been prophesied, my son Jeremy, that the Brothers must lose their vortex powers in a Year of the Wolf."

Tomorrow was the last day of the Year of the Wolf.

I had twenty-four hours within which to go underground, find Beatra in a dark and evil city, and bring her out again.

I looked up at him thoughtfully. "Do I bring her out safe?"

His mind shield slammed down tight.

It was chilling.

"Very well," I said. "But I don't think I can face my grandfather. Can you tell him?"

"Yes."

"And tell the abbot and Father Phaedrus farewell."

"You can do that yourself. Father

Phaedrus requires that you see him before you go. And Abbot Arcrite is even now preparing the floater. He will take you on the first leg of your journey. For this reason he cannot attend the death ceremony."

"And yet it is permitted for me? I thought only the Brothers were admitted to the deathbed of another Brother."

"You are a very special case. Phaedrus wishes it. You must come."

"Well, of course."

11. *Minds Within Minds*

A few moments later Brother Tien and I were admitted into the dimlit death chamber.

It was a pre-selected place, special for the occasion. Many of Phaedrus' predecessors had likewise given up their spirits here. The room was large, high-ceilinged (to permit ready escape of the soul), and heavy with incense.

The Brothers were kneeling in sorrowing semicircular rows around the bed. They had been chanting in low harmonious tones when I entered, but now they ceased and were silent.

In the center of the bed lay the dying monk, covered to his neck by a light white blanket. His body was a bare skeleton, his skull hairless and glinting under the faint multicolored lights.

But he still lvied. He was conscious, and his mind was still alert.

Something awesome was taking place. I felt nearly overwhelmed.

"Jeremy Wolfhead ...."

I started and took a step closer. The monks made way for me. "Yes, father?" I found that I was talking orally. But to him it did not matter.

"Within a very little while I shall prophesy, and then I shall die."

"Live forever, father."

"No time to be silly, my son."

"Sorry, father. I attend."

"Long ago I entered the mind of the Returner. I took all that he had. Did you know that? That was how we are able to tell you much about the world below."

"I see."

"Concentrate, Jeremy, enter in, and I will let you meet the Returner."

I tried to concentrate. For a moment, nothing much seemed to happen.

I relaxed, breathing quietly and rhythmically.

There was an image, then another.

I was in the mind of a stranger ... a young man.

At first it was a haunting, tantalizing thing. But after a time I sensed the subsonic chords of terror.

Flecks and foam of memory washed past. Occasionally something would seem to catch and lie against this mind, like a leaf drifting downstream and lodging against some submerged obstruction.

One sequence recurred again and again. The Returner was in a floater, cruising out over the bay, perhaps a hundred feet over the water. He was curious, and he was going to investigate something. During the last several months a series of hummocks (ten or eleven?) had materialized on field and forest, in a straight line that seemed to point to the grottoes of Horseshoe Bay.

He had inspected several of those hummocks. He knew they were great

piles of rock *cuttings*. He knew this meant subterranean excavations. Something or someone was carving out a tunnel far underground and somehow was transporting the rock topside. By now the tunnel must have reached an exit in one of the grottoes.

An underground civilization? He knew the myths, the fireside fairy tales taught in childhood. He remembered the strange prophecies handed down by the Brothers. It is the Year of the Wolf. Hell and its leaders are about to burst forth and kill every living thing on the surface. But they are thwarted just in time when a hero descends into their dark caverns, swims their terrible river Lethe, slays their monsters, and finally destroys their city.

Perhaps he was the one.

Then the memories returned, and he screamed. (But it was not a human sound, because of what they had done to him.)

The Returner remembered.

The sun was bright, the water quiet. The grottoes beckoned.

Which one to try first?

The biggest. That great sea cave, there. He brought the vessel down at the entrance to the great grotto and hovered there. Inside the sea cave all was dark and silent. The only sound was the rhythmic rush of the surf into the cave. Slowly he inched forward, keeping plenty of room above and below the craft. There were sea crocodiles here-abouts, and this would be a most inconvenient place to strike a jutting rock and disable his ship.

He turned on the beams and drifted inward a dozen yards or so. The lights showed that the caveside on his left came down in a steep wall to meet the sea. On the right, however, was a shallow shore, a jumble of rocks, sand, and gravel, that seemed to continue back into the cave for a considerable distance.

He cruised slowly on, looking for a better place to put the craft down. But the shelf didn't really get any better. In fact, it began to narrow. He would have to stop soon, if he were going to be able to turn the ship around. He picked out a barely possible patch on the shore and headed the ship toward it.

Then, all around him, the world seemed to explode. The little ship dropped on the rocks and broke up in flames. He stumbled out. Something hit him in the shoulder, and he dropped, paralyzed. Perhaps he was hit again. The Returner couldn't remember.

Time passed for the Returner. He had a dim awareness of figures standing around him. Strange men, with big eyes. They could see in the dark. Or did he find that out later? They tied him up, put him on a stretcher, and set off with him in the darkness.

And now the gaps began. And the images were too blurred to grasp. Much time and darkness had passed, and the Returner was still underground.

In the final sequence he was listening to voices. He was afraid.

The one they called the President said, "There will be others. We must give them warning, never to attempt to enter here."

"Then we should kill this one," said someone.

"They would never know, then, would they?" said the President. "We

lose the possibility of making him serve as a warning."

"But if we release him, he will tell them all that he has seen here."

"Not necessarily. I am thinking of a silent warning. He will be silent, yet he will represent a living warning as to what will happen to others who attempt to enter our city. We will give to him, and to all who might try to follow him, the Vow of Silence."

I, Jeremy Wolfhead (I had to search for my own identity for a moment!) jerked with pain. I was sweating copiously. I did not want to know about the Vow of Silence.

But I had to know. I re-entered the dying mind of Phaedrus, and within it the mind of The Returner.

The Returner himself seemed to answer. He was mind-speaking, long ago, to the abbot. I listened with Phaedrus. "The Vow of Silence? They cut out my tongue and sewed up my lips. But I got away. I took a floater. Down the great river. Over the falls, then down, down, down. Then the exploding heat, and steam, and up, up, up, tumbling and whirling. And now you must let me die. It is my right." (I knew that I was hearing again a plea made to the abbot twenty years ago. And next I heard the abbot's reply.)

"Nay, friend-who-returns. We are the Brothers. Your floater fell out of the Spume and into the snow dune. That is why you still live. Your body is broken and your mind is hurt. But it is our business to mend broken bodies. And we can help your mind to recover. You will live."

"No."

"You have parents. You have a wife. She carried your child. They need you. They think only of you. They are still sending out search parties. You should let us tell them."

"No. Tell them nothing. I am going to die. It is best that they think I am dead."

It was bewildering and horrifying.

Why was Phaedrus showing this to me?

"You have not understood everything," Phaedrus murmured wearily within my mind. "And perhaps I do not blame you. And indeed, it may be for the best. For when the time comes that you do understand — and that time must come — your sudden frenzy will give you added strength. You will become a momentary madman. Nevertheless, I must leave matters of the past and of the present."

I was crushed. I had concentrated, I had done my very best to follow the images, and it had been for nothing. I had failed him.

He said softly, "I prophesy."

The chamber was deathly silent.

The play of minds within minds had cost him much. He had faded greatly. The thoughts ebbed, waned. I barely caught them.

He continued faintly. "All the generations of the Brotherhood have existed but to send you underground at this hour. It is effort well spent. The Brothers are worthy, and you are worthy. The millennia have finally brought forth this day, these twenty-four hours. And in the last of these hours it will be decided that one great culture will live and one will die. Beware ...." His voice died away.

I waited a moment, then I said,

"Beware *what*, father?"

"The gods-eye."

I felt childishly at fault again, for I could not fathom what he was talking about. What cultures did he mean? And how, being underground, would I have any control over the gods-eye, which was far overhead? But at any rate, while he was prophesying, I would put to him the question that meant the most to me. "Do I bring Beatra out again?"

"Yes." (A thought-wisp, so faint I barely caught it.)

"Safe?"

I realized instantly that my earlier question should have been, "Do I bring her out safe?" But it was too late. The flickering fire in his mind had gone out. He was dead. And the chanting had already begun again.

I seemed to hear fluttering echoes of his mind-voice, "Jeremy, my son ... my son ... my son ...."

I was wracked by sudden chills; the funeral scars on my chest throbbed.

I barely noted the little white bird that came from nowhere, circled the room once, then soared up toward the high ceiling and disappeared.

I was turning to look for Brother Tien, when a hand touched my shoulder. It was he. Briefly, I studied the face of the physician-monk. I knew he loved Phaedrus, not only as surrogate father, but also as a product of his great surgical skill. Phaedrus' death must be taking a heavy toll on the sensibilities of this good man.

But his face was a carven mask. It showed nothing of his feelings. I wanted to say something to him, something to tell him I understood his grief, just a few bright and banal cliche sentences, but it was no good. "Sorry," I muttered.

"It was best," he said gently. "His time had come." There was not the slightest tremor in his voice. "Are you ready?"

I thought of grandfather. After he got over the initial shock of my departure, he would probably organize another funeral and lay another empty coffin in the earth alongside Beatra's.

I sighed, then turned as Brother Tien spoke again. "Our abbot waits for you in the floater. You must hurry."

"Virgil?" I asked.

"She is on board. Good-by, Jeremy."

"Yes, my friend."

I never saw him again.

12. *The Gates of Hell*

Abbot Arcrite took the helm of my floater (which he promised to return to my grandfather), and we set off across Horseshoe Bay to the distant grottoes. I looked down at Virgil from time to time. She trembled and whimpered most of the way out. What behavior for a dire wolf — the king of the forest!

After a time the face of the great cliffs loomed large, and the abbot let the floater sink low over the waves. "This," he said, "is as close as I dare to bring the floater. The undergrounders have detection devices at the mouth of the grotto. We know this from the report of the Returner."

Always this shadowy figure. Captured by the undergrounders, his brain drained away from him, and given the Vow of Silence. But, as I knew from my

vivid encounter with the dying Phaedrus, he had escaped and had been brought back to a brief demi-life by the Brothers. The Vow of Silence — which simply involved cutting out his tongue and lacing up his lips — did not prevent telepathic communication with him. But all of that was many years ago, and there was no way to know whether the things the Brothers had learned from him were still true.

I took a last look up at the lightening sky. There was a faint red in the north, and far overhead a V of wild swans was a-wing. But the V was interted, with the apex to the rear. Also, just over the southern horizon, the gods-eye, the symbol of all my past misfortunes and perhaps the harbinger of even worse to come, was about to vanish below the sea rim. I shivered. All the auguries were bad.

I looked over the railing down through the dim dawnlight into the waves. The wind had come up and there was a pounding surf under us.

"What are we about to do?" asked Virgil nervously.

"Do you see that big cave in the cliff — just at shore level?"

"Yes."

"Well, we're going to dive in and swim over there."

"If you think I am going to jump into all that cold wet water," said Virgil, "you are an idiot."

"Can you lower the floater a few feet?" I asked the abbot.

He obliged me, checking his height from time to time. "I can't get too close. If a wave hits us, we will be knocked into the water." But he got us within about six feet, and that was good enough. "Hurry," he said.

I stripped quickly, put my dagger between my teeth, and blanked out my mind. Virgil looked up at me instantly, but before she could realize what I was up to, I had lifted her in my arms and had jumped over the railing. I felt a snarl in my brain as we went over. We landed with a great *plosh*, went under, then struggled back up to the surface. I looked up in the semidarkness, but the floater was already pulling up and away. The abbot waved at us, but I did not wave back. The past was gone, and he had gone with it. It seemed now that the sun-world was no longer relevant.

Virgil had gathered sufficient of her wits about her to begin treading water and to curse me in nuances of lupo-human vocabulary I had not thought possible. I took her reaction as a good sign and began swimming toward the largest of the caves. From time to time I waited for her to catch up. Once, when I though she was tiring, I let her rest with her forepaws on my back. We caught our breath for several minutes before attempting to pass through the last and worst of the surf. One of the breakers separated us, and once I saw her a couple of yards away struggling upside down, with her legs clawing at the air. When she finally straightened out, she had much to say, but by then we were working our way into the great grotto.

I thought our troubles with the water were over. I was wrong. A great sinuous shape lashed the water near Virgil. I took my blade in hand and dove to her rescue. The sea creatuare was at that moment giving all of his attention to her flashing jaws and did

not notice until it was far too late that I was under him and was busily cutting his throat. He turned on me, but I was too quick for him. He died in the murk of his own blood.

And now I thought of the abbot's warning. "Have nothing dead on you when you enter the grotto. No clothing, metal, stone, or wood. Only living matter can enter the grottoes without detection." With vast regret, I threw the knife away.

The next breaker swept both wolf and man into the gloomy interior of the cave, where we managed to haul ourselves up on the slimy rocks.

Virgil sniffed once at me. She didn't like the blood-odor. "Think of it as a big sea rabbit," I said.

As we lay there panting and slowly regaining our strength, I looked around me in the near-darkness. There was barely enough light from the mouth of the cave to illuminate the grotto for a few yards behind us. Beyond that, there was a weird green phosphorescence. The abbot had prepared me for this. This flickering ghost light emanated from the myriad bodies of tiny sea microbes, both in the water, on the moist surfaces of the rocks, and up the walls and even on the ceilings. It had nothing to do with the fluorescent pigment the undergrounders used in some of their streets and caverns.

Just ahead of us, crumpled on the rocks, lay the charred skeleton of what had evidently once been a floater. How long had it been here? What foolhardy soul had brought it here? Could it have been the Returner? Had he cruised in at low tide, his curiosity overriding his good sense, and had he got shot down by some invisible detecto-gun?

I looked overhead. Sure enough, I thought I could see there the glint of glass and metal. The killing beam. He had been lucky to escape with his life.

As I passed around the bow of the hulk, I noticed the figurehead, or rather what once had been the figurehead. But it was now too charred to recognize. It was the head of something or someone, but beyond that, it would be hard even to speculate.

We passed on.

Then Virgil stopped suddenly and stood there, still as a rock, her hackles raised. She was staring into the depths of the cave.

"What is it?" I signaled to her.

"I don't know, but I don't like it. And, incidentally, there are several of them."

"Let's go take a look," I said.

"You go first."

I stood up and started picking my way over the rocks toward the rear of the cave.

Then I heard it, something heavy, lumbering, something slithery. We both stopped and froze.

Then came the bellow.

"It's a croc," I flashed to her.

She moved out a few steps ahead of me, and a horrible growl rumbled deep in her throat.

I warned her instantly: "Get back here, you nitwit!"

Now I could actually see the dark outline of the beast. It was a good ten yards long. Virgil and I together would hardly make a good appetizer.

I had no weapon. It was immaterial anyhow because I did not think anything smaller than an electrocannon

would have much effect on this leviathan. Still ... I noted that where the walls came down to the grotto floor, pockets of sand had collected. This was all I needed. I willed that one pinch of sand levitate, then another to balance it, and soon I had a whirling disk in motion. Time seemed to stand still.

"There are three more behind him," signaled Virgil.

My sand disk struck him in the right eye; then I whipped it over, and it took out his left eye. He came on for a moment even so, and then he began to scream. He dived into the water not two yards distant from us, and for a moment there was a great churning. One by one, the other creatures hurried after him into the water.

I noted then that sweat was streaming down my face, and I was cold. Virgil looked up at me with a grudging respect.

We pushed on into the deepening gloom. The finger of the sea soon disappeared, and we were walking on damp sand. The cave corridor began to widen perceptibly, and then we stood before a fork in the cave. Without hesitation I said, "Let's take the right-hand fork."

"You are pretty sure of yourself," she said.

Near-darkness faded into total darkness. Should I form a light-ball? Did they have sentries here, or light detectors? I decided to play it safe for the time being. We walked on for perhaps a hundred yards, Virgil slightly ahead of me. Suddenly she stopped and I almost fell over her.

My mind whispered to hers, "What's wrong?"

"There is some kind of chasm here."

I got down on my hands and knees and crawled inch by inch, and, sure enough, there it was. I felt around for a pebble and tossed it over the edge. We both listened intently for a long time.

"Didn't you hear it?" I asked her.

"I heard nothing," she said. "We might as well go home, now."

"No, we take the other fork."

We made our way back to the fork and took the left turn this time.

Within a few minutes we were stopped by a human artifact — the product of what had to be an advanced culture. There was an enormous iron grid across the tunnel face. I tried to rattle it but it would not budge. In the near darkness I felt the bars. Each was at least an inch in diameter, and they crisscrossed on two-inch centers. Only very small creatures could work themselves through the grid openings.

Virgil looked up at me. "*Now* can we go home?"

12. *Beyond the Iron Gate*

"Can you see anything?" I asked.

She peered through the great grid. "There is something big in there, covered with something, perhaps some sort of cloth. It hangs loosely over the thing."

"Canvas?"

"I don't know about canvas. But I guess it could be."

"Is it a floater?"

Her nose twitched. "Perhaps."

It had to be a floater. It must be the same one that had taken Beatra. And that meant there had to be some way to

raise this grid. There should be some machinery inside and a switch to activate it.

I knew that I could in time cut through the bars with a spinning sand disc. But that would certainly tell these people that I had entered the cavern, and for the time being I did not want them to know I was here.

There had to be another way.

I listened. There was nothing. Even the crashing surf was lost at this distance.

I had to chance it. I formed a ball of light on the other side of the grid and moved it slowly around the walls and ceiling near the gate. I found what I knew had to be there: a hydraulic lift mechanism, complete with electric servo motor. Two parallel wires ran from the motor to a panel box fixed in the caveside. I could barely make out a keyhole in the panel door. It was locked, of course.

I had to speculate about the mechanism inside the panel box. Presumably there was a permabattery, and next to that, a switch. When you closed the switch, the current flowed, the motor ran, and the gate lifted.

The only difficulty was, I couldn't think of any way to get into the panel box to close the switch.

But then I remembered an experiment I had carried out during my vortectic training. It would not be necessary to get into the panel box.

I brought the luminous vortex over to the wire pair where they emerged from the panel box, and let it hang there. Then I formed a cylindrical vortex, with just enough diameter to let the periphery impinge on one of the wires, and I doubled, quadrupled, its rate of spin. And the wire began to turn color. It soon became red-hot in the vortex area and began to emit a faint light of its own. Electrons were flowing from the hot end to the cold end. Despite the open switch, an electric current was being generated in the circuit.

There was a sudden click as the servo motor turned on. The gate rolled slowly up into its ceiling receptacle.

But then a soft red light began to blink overhead, just inside. That wasn't so good. An alarm had been sent somewhere.

I collapsed the vortices and jumped inside. Virgil followed.

After a moment the gate cranked down again, evidently moving by simple gravity. The red light went off. The darkness was total.

Just then, the tunnel floor began to vibrate. The great gate rattled metallically in its guide channels. Virgil whined and ran over to my side. "What is happening?" she asked.

I swallowed. "I am not really sure. Perhaps it is heavy machinery somewhere." I thought I knew what it was, but I did not want her to know. Not yet. "In any case, it seems to have stopped." Which it had. The tunnel was quiet again.

I peered down the corridor, but it was totally dark, and I could see nothing. I dared not reform the lightball, because I suspected we would have visitors shortly.

"Anything moving down there?" I asked Virgil.

"I can't see anything. There are man smells, but they are old."

We moved slowly in the darkness. I reached out and touched the canvas on the big object. I felt the floater hull underneath.

Virgil stopped suddenly. "I hear footsteps. Men running this way."

"How many?"

"Two, I think."

"They will have weapons," I said. "We will have to hide."

"Where?"

"In the floater. Under the canvas."

"That will be the first place they search."

Even my dull human ears now picked up the sound of padding feet. "I know. Come on." I lifted her up, and in a moment we were well-hidden under the folds.

We could hear them clearly now. Two men, running, with sure, even strides. They stopped, panting, and looked around.

"Nobody here," said one.

He spoke with a strange accent, but I understood him perfectly.

"But the gate went up," said the other. "The switch can only be opened and closed from the inside."

"But we had a temblor a few minutes ago. It was severe enough to momentarily short-circuit the switch. See, the panel box is still locked. It was just a false alarm."

"You may be right. But even so, we had better check the floater. The corporal will certainly ask about the floater."

While they were talking, I had been trying to see out through a partially open fold in the canvas. I saw the barest patch of light. The men were using some sort of portobeam.

Virgil might now be required to kill a man, quickly and cleanly, and with absolutely no hesitation. I thought of Goro, the hound. He had hesitated, and he had died. Even though — like Goro — she was not bred to kill human beings, Virgil had an inherent advantage. She hated humanity. Probably even me. I was certain she would perform adequately.

"They are going to pull back the canvas from this side," I signaled to her. "You take the one next to you, and I'll take the other. Go for the throat."

"The throat? My goodness." There was a sarcastic sneer in her assent, as though I, a mere human, were instructing her in the art of stalking woodchucks.

An unseen hand flipped back the heavy cloth.

Virgil struck. There was a crack as the portobeam struck the cavern floor and crashed.

I grappled in the darkness with the other guard. One of my hands found a weapon, the other his throat. He was a big man, considerably taller and heavier than I, and despite my initial advantage of surprise, I was unable to wrest his gun from him or do him any real damage. And soon, owing to his greater strength, he began slowly to twist his weapon toward me. We were locked side-by-side in lethal embrance, both of us grunting and panting, and the nose of his weapon was moving in tiny shuddering arcs toward my head. But these few split seconds of immobility gave me time to form a sand vortex, as a thin whining disk. It formed just over his head, and I brought it down into his skull, just over his ear. Particles

of bloody bone spattered all over my face. His body relaxed instantly. I got up and looked for Virgil. I could see nothing. "Virgil?" I called softly.

I could hear her footsteps sauntering over toward me. She yawned cavernously. "I thought I might have to help you."

I dusted the sand off my chest and legs. "Any trouble?"

"His throat was very soft. The jugular and windpipe came out together. He dropped, twitched a little, and there he is."

"Thank you."

There was the suggestion of a shrug in her reply. "If I let you get killed, how do I get out?"

"You have a point." I made a light-ball and studied the face of the man I had killed. So violent in life, so peaceful in death. The pale features were completely relaxed, the mouth curling in a half smile, the great owl-eyes languidly half open. He was a little older than I. Perhaps a kind husband and a loving father. I did not want to inspect Virgil's victim, but I had the almost certain impression that he was a young man, still a boy. His mother would mourn him tonight. They had both been doing their duty, and we had cut them down.

But I did not permit myself to feel sorry for either of them. They would have been quite happy to have killed me. They — and all their kind — were my deadly enemies.

I turned back to the body of "my" man and began stripping off his uniform. The fabric of the uniform was soft and subtle, closely woven from some light, synthetic monofilamentary material. Some of our own fabrics were, of course, machine-woven, but they did not compare with this stuff.

Virgil watched in patient disapproval while I fastened his boots on my feet and checked his electropistol. It was neither better nor worse than similar electros I had restored in our family shops. How odd that these people, with such advantages, had stood still, technology-wise, for thirty centuries.

I holstered the pistol and picked up the weapon of the other guard. "And now," I said, "we have to get out of here. Stay just ahead of me as we go down the tunnel."

We went on, ever downward. I followed the sound of Virgil's footsteps, steady, yet cautious. We soon entered an area where phosphorescent pigment had been applied to the walls, and I could see our surroundings, albeit very dimly.

We had now come half a mile, without a glimmer of real light. Nothing but this eerie dimness, where everything seemed half hallucination. It troubled me. Would the entire underground be this dark? Yet, I couldn't complain. So far it was exactly as described by the Returner.

"Stop!" said Virgil.

I waited while she sniffed the air. "For a moment the odors were quite strong. Now they are weaker. I think a door opened, then closed again."

"That might have been the corporal of the guard, looking out the door to see whether his two men are returning. Did you smell metal? Such as rifles stacked? Radios or communicators?"

"Many metals. Yes."

"Undoubtedly a guard post, stuck right in the middle of the tunnel. How many men?"

"Two different scents."

"Can you see the door from here."

"No. I think it may be around the bend of the tunnel, perhaps fifty yards away. We are very close."

I felt the floor of the corridor. Hard, almost glazed. Obviously artificially dug, possibly by some machine that chopped out pieces of stone with a white-hot cutting blade.

It was great engineering, but it left the tunnel floor smooth as glass. No sand. No rubble. No pebbles. And I did not dare form a luminous sphere. No vortex for this place.

Nevertheless, I was going through that guard post. Somehow. I had to. One the other side I could hope to find someone who would tell me where Beatra was being held. I needed information. I needed a feel for the area, the people. Very importantly, assuming I could actually find Beatra, I needed to know how to get her out again. The bodies at the grid gate must sooner or later be discovered, and when that happened, this exit would certainly be blockaded. Was there another way out? (Aside from the deadly Spume, which had served the Returner so brutally!)

I said to Virgil, "The door is locked, of course. And there is a password, or a secret knock, or something to identify the returning patrolmen. We don't have it. Nevertheless, we have got to make them open that door without shooting us. We will move very quietly toward the door. I don't know whether it opens to the right or to the left. So I will have to stand back a little. And here's what I want you to do." I explained the plan carefully. An hour ago she might have protested that it was insane. For the time being, however, she seemed to have given up.

We found the door just around the bend. I stayed hidden while she trotted up to within a few yards of the door. And then she lay down and began to whimper and whine.

14. *The Guard House*

In a few seconds I heard a creak. Although I could see nothing, I knew the door was opening a little. I knew that curious eyes were peering out through the slit. I heard a muffled exclamation. The man had seen Virgil. And now the door creaked again. He had evidently called his companion. I heard a muffled dialog but could not distinguish any individual words.

My moment had come. I stepped around the bend, brought both pistols up, aiming at what I supposed were the two theoretical heads in a theoretical doorway. I pulled the triggers. Flickering blue-white beams of light shot out. And I saw both guards in that instant. I had actually hit one of them. The guard on my left. The shot struck him in the neck and killed him almost instantly. The other shot struck the door and knocked a hole in it. But it did not matter. I got off another shot from the pistol in my right hand, so quickly that the two men seemed to fall together.

Virgil got up and came over to sniff at them. She coughed. "That thing makes a bad smell, and it makes a smelly hole."

"The beam makes a lot of ozone.

The gas has a bitter scent, and it can make you cough. The smell in the wounds is simply burnt flesh. You must have seen the same thing when you hunted with old Thornhouse."

"Yes, I remember." She was thoughtful. "That was all very long ago, wasn't it? And then you did this ... thing to me. I am not the same. I don't know what I am any more."

"It was done, and here we are."

I pulled the two bodies outside into the tunnel. Then we stepped cautiously into the guard house. I closed the door behind us and felt around in the darkness. I found a desk and chair. I dropped into the chair. I heard sounds suggesting that Virgil was snuffing about the room. "You can see me easily," I said. "You can see everything here. But I can barely make you out. It is too dark. I need to see through your eyes."

"You can."

"What do you mean, I can?"

"You always could. But I have never let you. I am entitled to my privacy."

"How is this done?"

"If I choose to do it."

"If you choose to do it."

"Start with the present situation. You have implanted a little piece of your brain at a certain place in my brain. It has developed contact with certain knowledge and judgment centers of my brain. If I determine a fact, it is passed on to this bit of foreign matter within my skull. And this occurs whether I like it or not. And then you can ask this bit of you within me, is it dark, or is it light, or is someone coming, or what do you hear; and it answers you back. But, in substance, you are talking to me through your ambassador and not to my senses directly."

"And you now say I can see directly with your eyes? I don't have to ask, 'Do you see anyone coming?'"

"That is true."

"Why didn't you tell me this before?"

"Because it was none of your business."

"But now, you have changed your mind?"

"I am thinking about it."

I knew better than to press her. "Well, Virgil, think about it. Meanwhile we have to plan the next stage of the search. We have to get a general idea of the street plan of this underground city. We have to capture a local citizen and ask him where Beatra is being kept. Then we have to go there, free her, and escape."

"It sounds very simple."

I knew she was being sarcastic. I asked, "Can you see anything on the walls? There ought to be a map of the city in a guard post."

She got up and walked around the room and halted at the opposite wall. "There is something here. Full of crisscrossing lines, some in different colors."

I felt my way over, knocking over a chair in the process. It was a rather large panel, head tall, and wide as my outspread arms. But all I could see was a gross mass of gray. I needed a light, but dared not make a luminous globe.

I felt along the wall area near the two doors for some sort of switch. I couldn't find it. I could hear Virgil

yawning. That meant she was bored and impatient. "What you are looking for isn't there."

I tried the desks. Perhaps a portobeam? But why would they need one? It wasn't dark in here to these people.

"We can go back," said Virgil. "All we have to do is go back through the tunnel, raise the gate, get in the floater, and off we go. They can't possibly stop you."

"Virgil, are we going to die here because you won't let me look at a map?"

"I could get out all by myself."

"Now who's crazy?"

"Well, I'm not your slave, you know. You could at least say please. If you want to see through my eyes, that is."

"Please."

And so I was permitted "inside." From my implanted cortical fragment I radiated slowly down a labyrinth of neural pathways to her optical lobe, the visual center at the back of her cerebral cortex. Her optical nerves terminated here, and around these termini were fixed the images of her entire visual history, both consciously and unconsciously remembered. Before I came to rest in the present, I passed through the meadows and forests that had formed her life in her glacial valley home with old trapper Thornhouse.

And so, with her eyes I looked about the guard room. It was surprisingly large and roomy. The ceiling must have been fifteen feet high. And looking up, I saw something move: an odd sort of mobile dangling from the ceiling and trembling. I was sure it wasn't there for esthetic purposes, but I couldn't imagine why it had been hung there. Another oddity: there was a small aquarium on a rack by one of the walls. In the bottom were two tiny things that looked like miniature catfish. Somehow, the patrolmen of Dis didn't strike me as keepers of pet fish. This aquarium was here for a purpose.

Virgil was becoming impatient again. She closed her eyes, shutting off my vision. I took the hint. "The map, Virgil."

"The map, O great master."

If it pleased her, I could live with it.

She looked up at the wall and saw the map. It was all in shades of white, brown, and gray. That surprised me. I had expected colors. But whether Virgil was color-blind, or the undergrounders were color-blind, or whether this was their usual way of making maps, there was no way to know. But for the moment it scarcely mattered. The plat was sufficiently confusing in this simple format. Initially, it was imcomprehensible. Then streets, avenues, and buildings began to emerge. But the lettering was peculiar. Our own letters and alphabet had evidently diverged considerably during the three thousand years that the Desolation had separated us. What I needed was a starting point. I looked around the edges of the panel and finally found what I wanted. There was an arrow, pointing to a tiny square that sat on a curving line. There were three words over the arrow. I made them out to read, "You are here." I traced the line out to its end. There, in a different shade of brown, was drawn part of the contour of Horseshoe Bay. It showed the very cave where we had entered.

Starting there, I traced my way down the corridor to our present post, then down the tunnel toward the city, where it emerged into several forks opening on a square. I studied the network of crisscrossing lines. Perhaps here they did not have buildings in the sense that I knew them. Probably they had simply cut out rooms with their excavating equipment, leaving walls and archways as supports to hold up the overlying rocks.

Well, all of this speculation was futile. However the buildings were made, there were no labels on any of them. Nothing that said "Beatra Held Here," or even "Jail," "Police Station," "Hospital," or anything like that.

I returned Virgil's vision to her, walked back behind the desk, and sat down. "We are going to have to do a little kidnapping of our own. We have to find someone who knows where Beatra is."

"Opportunity is about to knock," said Virgil dryly.

She heard it first, of course. And now I heard it — the sound of boots clomping up the corridor on the city side. Probably the patrol relief. Did they suspect anything? No, they couldn't.

I reached out for their minds. But it was a jumble, and they were not yet close enough for me. "How many?" I asked Virgil.

"Two."

It was to be expected. Periodically, they would relieve two men out of four. Was there a password? Perhaps there was no need for one on this side of the post. But just to make sure, I opened the "front" door casually, glanced toward the approaching men (whom I could see only vaguely), lifted my arm in brief greeting, and, leaving the door wide open, walked back into the office.

Virgil, whom I had commanded to hide under the desk, gave me her eyes again. I was leaning over the desk as they came in, apparently looking at some papers. But this was purely for appearances. All the while, I was in Virgil's mind, watching them intently with her eyes.

The two men were about the same height, stocky, muscular, with stolid features. As expected, their eyes were large, and the pupils within them were the size of coins.

As they entered, I got up from the chair, turned away from them, and stretched, meanwhile watching them carefully through Virgil's eyes. Then I pulled the electrobeam from the holster at my belt and turned around. I spoke into their minds simultaneously. "Gentlemen, please do exactly as you are told, or I will kill you. First of all, drop your gun holsters. Easy, easy. Now, raise your hands."

They did as they were told, while their chins slowly dropped, and, if it were possible, their eyes widened further. The first to enter seemed to recover first. "Who are you!" he said hoarsely. "What is this!" Now their eyes began darting about the room. "Where is the patrol?" demanded the first man. His accent was odd, but I could understand him perfectly. And presumably he could understand me. I switched over to plain talk.

"I have killed the four men of the patrol."

"What do you want?" whispered Number One.

"Cooperation."

They waited, motionless, arms uplifted, wary. Meanwhile Virgil came out from under the desk.

"Look at that." gasped Number Two. They both took a step backward. Number One began to lower his right arm.

"Don't be stupid," I said. "If you tell me what I want to know, she will not touch you."

"And what do you want to know?"

"There is a floater in stocks at the terminus of this corridor, just before the grid-gate." I pointed to the map. "Four weeks ago one of your raiding parties took that floater, opened the gate, and crossed to the opposite point of the bay. There you killed my hound Goro, shot a piece out of my skull, left me for dead, and took away my wife, Beatra. I am here to take her back. All you have to do is tell me where I can find her."

Number One answered in a low, incredulous guttural: "You are mad!" But images were forming in his brain. *He knew. He had seen.* She had been taken to a house. A big, special place.

If he could only be persuaded to put it into words, it would crystallize, and I would have what I needed. I could make him do it, but a slight shift in tactics was indicated. I sighed and turned to Number Two. "Open the exit door over there and tell us what you see. Nothing sudden. Slow and easy."

He walked over, opened the door, and looked down the corridor. His voice came back as strained and twisted as the image in his mind. "Two bodies. Looks like Josson and Smit."

Through Virgil's eyes I studied Number Two. "If you refuse to assist me, there is no reason why I should permit you to continue to live."

"I don't really know anything," said the guard. "I know only what they say, that the President led a raid and captured a sun-devil female."

"Where is she?" I put the question to Number Two.

"I don't know." Sweat was pouring down his face. It was particularly odd, because by Virgil's infrared scan, his face was cold and clammy, and these streaks of perspiration were by comparison scalding hot. They showed up as brilliant lacy streaks on his forehead and cheeks.

"What have you heard?"

Number Two sneaked an uneasy glance at his companion. Number One frowned at him. The frown was wasted. For Number Two truly knew nothing specific. But he was about to have a profound influence on Number One, who *did* know something.

I shot Number Two between the eyes. He was starting to fall before Number One understood what had happened.

"He refused to cooperate," I explained gently. "But I expect that you will have better sense."

Number Two crashed to the floor, and the sweat jumped from Number One's face. And now the words and images were forming quickly. "The White House," he stammered. "On the seventh level. You can find it easily. Take the descender to the second level. Proceed down the street half a mile through the warehouses, then

take the next descender to the seventh level, and go on straight way to the White House. That's where she's being held."

"I want you to go over to the map and draw a circle around this 'White House.'"

"With what?"

"You have a marker in your breast pocket."

"They will kill me."

"Maybe not. But I certainly will, if you don't do as I suggest."

He stepped over the body of his fallen companion and faced the map. He drew a wavering circle around a cluster of interconnecting squares in the center of the panel.

And now I was satisfied that that was all he could tell me. I looked at him contemplatively. He grasped what I was thinking, and his arms jerked.

"Steady!" I warned him.

The problem was (and he well understood this), that if I tied him up the next relief would discover him in a few hours. Could I find Beatra and get her out in that time? How long would it take to find the White House? What further delays and dangers lay ahead? One call from this place, and the White House would be ringed with guards, and every patrol in the city would be on the streets searching for me. I could not leave him here. But I did not dare take him with me. Was there any undiscoverable nook or cranny nearby where I could leave him, safely bound and gagged for the time being?

The decision was taken from me.

The guard dropped and dove at my feet.

Unhappily for him, I was in his mind. I had followed the gathering of his resolve, the flow of impulses in his motor cranial areas, the tensing of his toes and leg muscles.

I shot him in the head and simultaneously stepped out of the way of his lunging corpse. I begrudged this second blue flash, but it couldn't be helped. Had the sudden light been noticed through the windows? I opened the door for Virgil. She looked down the corridor on the city side, sniffing curiously. "Nothing, nobody, Just some very interesting smells."

I looked through her eyes. It was a fairly wide street, even though it was evidently in a little-frequented part of the city. But there was something very strange about it: it was lined on both sides with floaters. Empty, waiting ...? Waiting for what? A puzzle! Beyond the lines of floaters seemed to be blank walls interspersed with doors. Storage and tool sheds, I hazarded. All very curious, but I had no time to sort it out.

"Before we go," I said, "there is one last thing I want to do."

"Such as what?"

"The map. I want to memorize the main features."

"An exercise in total futility."

It was an exercise in total futility to argue with her. I borrowed her eyes and studied the map once more. I developed a fair recall for the main boulevards, cross streets, intersections, and descender shafts. There appeared to be about a dozen levels. Everything seemed to bottom out at about the twelfth or thirteenth level, almost as though some geologic feature precluded going any deeper.

"I'm ready now," I said. "Let's find

A

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B

a place to hide these two bodies and then we can leave." I stepped outside and walked over to the nearest door. It opened into a smallish room, full of boxes, on shelves stacked to the ceiling, and on the floor. Virgil sneezed. It was a dusty place. I folded back the lid of one of the boxes. It was full of files and papers. Good enough. I returned to the guard chamber, pulled the two bodies outside and into the room, and there I stacked boxes around and over them. They would eventually be found, of course, along with the two in the corridor and the two at the outer gate. But none of them would be able to tell their discoverers who had invaded their city, or why. The police would not know whom to look for, nor our purpose here.

I went back to the nearest floater and tried its door. It was locked. I didn't bother trying to break in. Like my own, the steering column was probably locked, and even if I could hot-wire it, I wouldn't be able to steer it. Well, never mind.

We set out on foot and eventually left the floaters behind us.

The streetway soon intersected a respectably wide avenue, lined with tall treelike growths and rows of strange dense shrubs. I hid behind a row of shrubbery while Virgil wriggled under it, thrust her head through, and looked carefully up and down the avenue. A floater passed slowly, and far down the way another was approaching. It slowed at an intersection, then turned and disappeared. That was all. How could this be? Where was everybody?

And then I understood. Like our own people far above, the dwellers of Dis had adapted to a rhythm of day and night. I had entered the grotto at dawn of my own time, but down here it was still night. Naturally the streets were nearly empty.

I had Virgil look up and down the street. As far as she could see, it was completely lined with these strange trees and shrubs.

As I peered out into the dim light, I noticed winged bird-sized creatures flitting about. I identified them tentatively as some sort of bat. And how could it be otherwise? No song birds would be here; only these mysterious creatures of the night.

"Somewhere around here," I flashed to Virgil, "is a descender. We have to go down two more levels."

The descender turned out to be an enormous spiral staircase. The great size puzzled me for a moment. Why so wide and high? Just then, as though in answer, a floater whirled around the bend of the stairwell and passed over our heads without a backward glance. We did not have time to cringe against the wall. The shaft was big because it had to accommodate vehicles as well as people.

Virgil turned to watch it disappear around the turn of the stairway.

Extraordinary, I thought. They must have seen us. And yet the hand on the steering wheel of the floater had not boggled an iota. Was it common practice for dire wolves to roam the streets of this Hades? Hardly. But there was a simpler explanation. The driver had not reacted to Virgil because his fleeting glimpse of her had told his eyes: Man and Dog. She was a simple optical illusion.

I smiled and put my hand on her

head. "Virgil, I hereby dub thee, Dog."

"And may you roast here in Hell."

We reached the second level without further incident.

This level was in the suburbs of the city. We peeked warily around the corner of the great entrance way. I saw nothing in motion. This was an area of sheds, warehouses, and light industry.

Virgil sniffed. "Some kind of food-processing plant a block or two up the road. I am hungry."

"Forget it. We both had a good meal before we hit the water."

"That was two hours ago."

"We won't die of starvation."

"You may be right."

I saw what she meant. A mysterious beam of light was moving slowly up the avenue. It was the first deliberate and continuing illumination I had seen here. To the undergrounders it must have been as glaring as a searchlight in the world above.

I studied it through Virgil's eyes. The beam came from a floater. The little ship hovered a few feet above the street, and it was moving slowly toward us, sweeping the doorways of the buildings one by one.

15. *Beatra*

Virgil shrank back against my leg. I felt her coarse pelt trembling, and I sensed, rather that heard, a deep rumble in her throat.

"Police," I said. My mind message was clear and terse.

"Are they looking for us?"

"I don't know. It may be simply routine. They may do this for all their streets, perhaps even two or three times a night. I think if they were looking for us, there would be a dozen ships, crawling all over the place." I inhaled deeply, then slowly let the air out of my lungs. But even as I was replying, my heart was pounding away. Routine or not, the situation was rapidly deteriorating. In a matter of seconds that spotlight would sweep slowly up and over us, then it would jerk back to us, there to impale us with its luminous shaft.

My thought rang out to Virgil like clanging steel. "We are going to take that floater."

I thought she would immediately tell me I was crazy. But she was a female, and full of surprises. "What do you want me to do?" she asked. Her flank ceased to vibrate. Now that the moment for action had arrived, she had relaxed again.

"I am going to do a thing that will cause the floater to pull up. After it stops, one of the guards will get out and run around behind the warehouse at our rear. As soon as he goes around the corner, start after him. Kill him."

"He has a gun."

"And you, my dear, have sharp beautiful teeth."

I looked about with her eyes. I found what I expected. There was plenty of dust and dirt in this area. It had been settling here for perhaps hundreds of years, and the area was rarely if ever cleaned.

As the floater slowly approached, I formed a spinning column from the dust on the ground on the opposite side of the street. Virgil's ears perked up, and she watched curiously. I built the thing up until it was roughly the shape

and size of a man. Then I made it lean forward a little, and I moved it rapidly across the head-beam of the oncoming police vessel, toward the place where Virgil and I were hiding at the street side. It became a fugitive, running, fleeing from the police. It was so lifelike it amazed even me.

The floater stopped instantly.

The fugitive was now across the street, and he vanished behind the building to our rear.

A guard dropped from the vessel and hit the street running toward us.

I watched the guard with her eyes as he passed us and followed the dust-phantom behind the building.

Virgil suppressed a yelp.

"Take him," I said.

She flashed away silently. I listened, but I could not hear even the impact of her pads on the ground. The unfortunate quarry would never know what hit him.

I let my sight vanish with Virgil, because I knew what would happen next, and I knew I would be busy with my next problem.

When the second guard saw the savage shape bound around the corner after his cohort, he immediately jumped from the floater and started running toward us. I heard and sensed this, rather than saw it.

And now I would have to take a real chance. In order to be sure of killing this man with an electropistol, I needed light. If I fired one shot, that would give me enough light for a second shot, but if I missed him then, he would be around the corner, and the third shot would be his, and I would be dead, and *he* would have the right to declare who pursued phantoms. No, that way was too risky. But there were other light sources.

As he passed me, I formed a tiny luminous air globe six feet over my head and behind me. It was a little thing, but to him it must have been a sunburst. He whirled instantly, blinded, and threw an arm over his eyes. I fired. By the globe-light I saw blood gush from a great round hole that suddenly appeared in his throat. His arm fell away, then he put a hand to the flood in his jugular. Then his knees buckled, and he dropped.

At that moment Virgil trotted around the corner, licking blood from her chops. "Did you take care of yours?" I asked. She tossed her muzzle. So stupid a question was totally beneath her contempt. I smiled grimly, collapsed the light point, and took over her eyes. "Look toward the building again," I said, "while I drag this one around the corner."

So now I — we — had killed eight men. Did I feel remorse? Regrets? Quite the contrary. For one of them had told me where Beatra was being held, and two had brought me their floater, almost as if I had ordered it up for hire. Besides which they had clothed me and provided me with weapons. I felt grateful!

After I disposed of the corpse, I returned to the floater. "Let's see if we can make this thing work." The door was still open, and the motor was still running. It leaned very slightly as we got in, then the gyros righted it. Virgil looked it over quickly. It had two seats, a radio box, restraint bars in the back to hold prisoners, weapon racks, fire

extinguisher, and a few other things I could not immediately identify. But otherwise it was very like my own personal floater which my grandfather had found buried in debris-shale near New Bollamer and which we had restored together in his shops. It probably operated on the antigravity principle, the same as mine. (But what the antigravity principle is, and how it works, I don't know, and shall never understand.)

Everything was falling into place. And there was an extra piece of luck. Just before the floater had stopped, it had shone its beam on the door of the fatal warehouse, and I had read the sign:

EMIGRATION
EMERGENCY FUEL OIL

Oil? The very fact that the stuff existed here invited conjecture and speculation. (How did they get it? Did they drill even deeper into the earth's crust and pump it up from pools, as the ancients are said to have done? Did they synthesize it? If so, how, and from what? What use did a nuclear-powered civilization have for fuel oil? And finally, what was this "Emigration"?) But it was pointless and time-wasting even to think about it.

I left the machine and walked over to the building. It was locked, of course. I kicked the door in. Musty clouds of dust swirled out of the darkness. I coughed. Virgil sneezed, then stepped gingerly inside, and I took her eyes. The oil was in ceramic containers stacked in large wooden crates. Some sort of vegetable fiber was packed in between the jars, apparently to minimize breakage. I gathered up an armful of the shredded fibers and a couple of the clay urns. I tossed the fiber packing all around the floor of the floater, then I put the jars behind the driver's seat.

Virgil sniffed dubiously. "I hope you know what you're doing."

I closed the floater door. "Be quiet. I have to experiment a moment with the controls." Everything checked. Forward and reverse were governed by a floor pedal, the same as on my own craft back home. Right and left turns were controlled by a steering wheel, and descent and ascent by moving the steering column forward or back. The only real difference seemed to be the rate of ascent. That was understandable. Too swift a climb would crash the thing into the street ceiling. There were a couple of unfamiliar viewing screens. They gave views of the surfaces of the street and ceiling, below and overhead. These extra screens would be useful, especially to me, the unskilled intruder.

I turned the ship around, and we started off slowly down the street.

"Where now?" asked Virgil.

"To the next descender. There ought to be one about a mile down the road." I was glad now that I had taken the trouble in the guard house to memorize that map. It now glowed and scintillated in my mind. To the descender. Down another five levels. Then forward down a broad avenue, half a mile to a cluster of walled buildings. And somewhere, in there, was my beloved. But not for long. *We were coming.*

The street was empty. We reached the descender shaft without incident.

I now understood a further purpose

of the two additional viewing screens in the front panel. Out in the street they had shown simply the surfaces of the street and the street ceiling. In the street, I had little need of them. There, all I had really needed were front and rear views. But now, I had to descend, and I had to know what was below as well as what was above the ship. The screens provided this information quite adequately. Far below, there did indeed appear to be one dim red light slowly rising. Since my present craft had three tiny red lights in a triangle, this meant to me that the ascending floater was not a police ship. That was fine with me. I watched it continue to ascend for a few seconds. If I stayed where I was, it would crash into the bottom of my ship. I must be in the wrong lane. I moved over into the left-hand area of the great shaft and began a cautious descent.

"Sit up here in front with me," I commanded the huntress. "I hereby promote you to police dog. Just look alert; a little grim, perhaps."

She sneered.

We dropped past the rising ship fairly quickly. It had one occupant. He looked at us curiously, then held up his hand in greeting. Was the dead driver of this machine supposed to know him? I doubted it. I held my hand up in brief languid acknowledgment, and then he was above us. The next moment I picked up the green ligths of the bottom of his ship in my front panel. And then he was gone altogether. Apparently he had turned off on the next side street. But I couldn't worry about him. If he had radioed the central police about a suspicious patrol ship, there was absolutely nothing I could do about it. I had to proceed on the assumption that my presence here was still unsuspected.

I dropped the ship another four levels, to the seventh, then moved out into what must have been the widest, most spacious boulevard in the entire city. It was lined on either side by great and strange trees, and bordering them were parks containing shrubs, trees, statuary, and fountains.

All of this came to a dead end half a mile down the avenue. For here rose the great flickering facade of what had to be their vaunted White House. A patrol of guardsmen passed briskly in front of this great building. With Virgil's eyes, this was the only movement that I could detect. The place was protected by a stone wall, head-high, and above this an immense grille on one-inch bars stretched from the wall to the boulevard ceiling. As I had anticipated, there was indeed a gate for the entrance of floaters. The gate was another iron grid, much like the one I had encountered in the grotto, except that this one was considerably larger. A few feet away from the gate was a doorway. Even as I watched, a guard walked casually out of the doorway and looked up and down the broad walkway in front of the building. My mind reached out for his. The contact wisps slid along the crevices of his occipital area, probing, searching.

This was the place! This man had been on duty at this very gate when the kidnap party had returned with her that fateful night. And she was still here!

The guard re-entered the post, and the little door closed behind him.

I was beginning to tremble. Virgil looked up at me and whined.

And now my mind reached behind the forbidding walls. There were many people inside, moving about on the inner court. How could that be? It was night here. The people should be home in their beds. In this White House, however, something special seemed to be going on. I seized upon one mind at random for a closer study. The man was evidently another guard, one of a small group. He and his group were standing beside a floater, at the entrance port. He seemed to be waiting for something ... for someone ... or perhaps for an event. The thought images were coming in strongly ... the White House ... the doors opening ... here they come ... I see her ....

Her?

I cast my mind in the direction I thought the guard was looking. I caught a group ... of men ... and now a woman. But it wasn't Beatra. And then I had it. If Beatra were being brought out of the White House, she would of course be accompanied by one or more woman guards. It was a female guard whose mind I had touched. But why were they bringing my darling out? I couldn't imagine. Nor did I care. It was a piece of incredible good fortune. This way, I wouldn't have to break in and make a building-to-building search, while *they* were searching for *me*.

I was back again, this time touching one mind after another. Male, female, sometimes repeating. They were now all very close to the invisible ship.

And then my insides seemed to turn upside down.

Beatra! I had found her!

Did she know I was here? That my mind was touching hers? "Beatra! Beatra!" I called to her mind. "I am here! I have come for you! Stay! Stay!" Although I could not see her, I knew that she was looking wildly about her and that she had heard my mental voice. They began to drag her forcibly.

Where were they taking her? Back inside? There was no reason to do that. But they didn't seem to be heading for the exit grid, either. With desperate urgency I searched for the mind of the chief guard, or the pilot, a matron, anyone who knew the ship's destination. I found wisps of information here and there. Something about a further descent, to a gloomy, forbidding place. A maximum security prison of some type.

The immediate and rather horrid problem was, they were not coming out on the boulevard. There seemed to be some sort of floater-port located *within* the White House grounds, a great private shaft that went up and down to other levels. I had found her, but now I was about to lose her again — this time perhaps indefinitely.

She must not get on that ship. I had to do something, and quickly. Fortunately, I came prepared. I swung my little craft around and pointed its nose at the great gate. I turned back into the floater, seized the two jars, and shattered them against the bed of strawlike material that I had spread behind the seats. Next, I fired a shot with my electropistol into the oil-drenched straw. It began to burn.

"Get out," I commanded Virgil. She obeyed with alacrity, for she greatly feared the growing flames. I grabbed a

rifle from the racks, jumped out on my side of the ship, then reached through the open door and laid the rifle across the accelerator pedal. The little ship leaped forward.

Events now followed as though I had written a play-drama for them. The blazing ship struck the big grille-gate dead-center and dropped, a red-tongued inferno. The patrol came stumbling back up the walkway, blind, holding their hands over their eyes. Three men groped their way through the guard doorway, likewise shielding their eyes. I rather suspected they might be permanently blinded. They were ill-prepared to deal with such a catastrophe. One man went back in and emerged with some sort of smallish fire extinguisher. Whether he ever used it, I will never know, because, in the red glare I had seen flickering shapes through the iron gate, and the big floater, buoyant at the dock. I burst through the guard doorway, with Virgil close behind, and dashed for the floater. Two women were dragging a third woman across the entrance board that stuck out, tonguelike, under the ship door. Before they disappeared into the vessel, I caught a glimpse of a face. It turned back, searching, and contorted by its own anguish and by the fantasies of the flames. Oh, beloved, what have they done to you! The funeral scars on my chest began to pulse and drum.

Through the acrid, drifting smoke and the flames of the burning floater, I saw that the great metal plates of the White House exit shaft were fully open, above and below, and Beatra's ship was now moving slowly out into the void.

Incredibly, the ship door was still open, and just below it, the entrance tongue-board was still extended. The tongue-board jutted out about two feet from the shipside.

"Come!" I signaled Virgil. I ran. I knocked people down. I leaped across the gap to the tongue-board. The wolf was just behind me.

Several things happened. I had already noted two figures just beyond the doorway. I saw their faces, and I recognized both. One was the man they called the President.

The other was Beatra.

He was pulling her aside and simultaneously pushing a lever by the door-side.

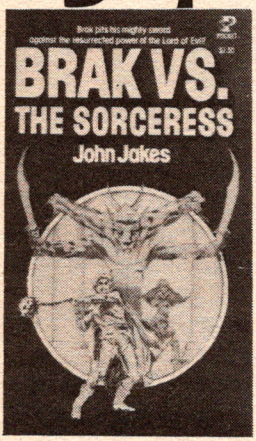
All of this was happening while Virgil and I were in midair.

The door slammed shut in my face. I was frozen there, balanced precariously on the little step with Virgil, looking into the ship through a glass porthole, and they were in the corridor looking back at me, in the wavering red light of the flames behind me, believing and unbelieving. I looked at them both, but I saw only her. Her hair was in tangles. Her face was thin and drawn, her eyes were sunken and shadowed. They had interrogated her, and they had done terrible things. But I looked at her and beheld only beauty.

"Jeremy!" shrieked Beatra. I could hear it through the ship walls. She broke away and began to beat on the door with her fists. We looked at each other through that cruel glass for seconds.

The President came up behind her. For an instant his pale features adjoined hers in a horrid cameo. His lips

BRAK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(which looked as though they had been added to his mouth by sardonic afterthought) parted, and his teeth gave up a wolfish grin in the firelight. He had grasped the total situation very quickly. He understood who I was. And then he threw his head back, laughed, and pulled a lever by the entrance way.

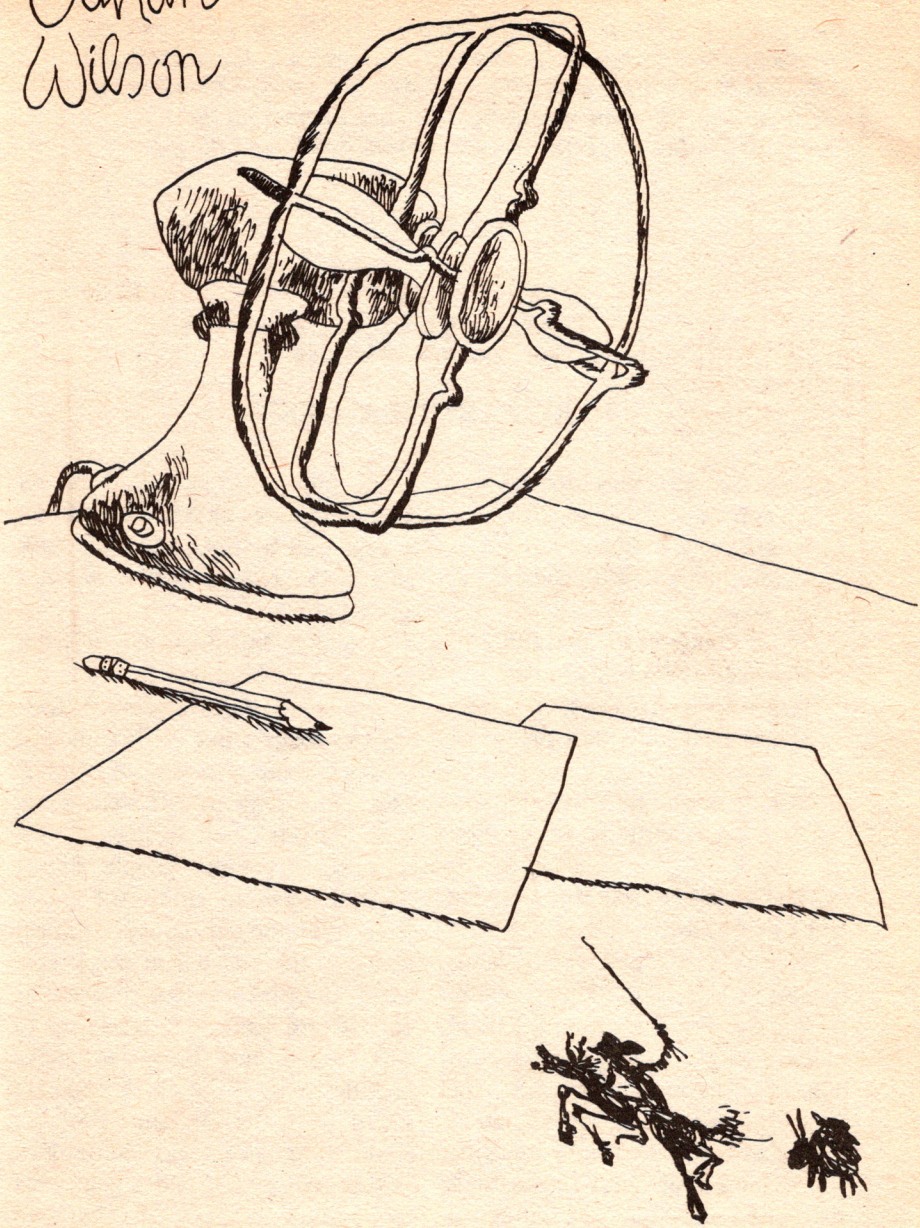
The little tongue-board scraped into the side of the ship.

We hung there for a fraction of a second. Virgil began to moan.

At first the fall was slow, almost leisurely. I had time to sense the chill, indignant air that we were disturbing. I remember looking up at the tiny green running lights of the bottom of Beatra's ship, and that they were turning in slow tight circles. And then we were plummeting down, down, into blackness.

(to be concluded next month)

Gahan Wilson



Here is a fine, eerie story about a mysterious island off the Cape Cod coast and the unhappy vacationer who is drawn to it. Elizabeth Lynn is 30, has been writing and selling sf for several years. She teaches a course called "Woman, Reality and Science Fiction" in the Women's Studies Department at San Francisco State College.

The Island

by ELIZABETH A. LYNN

Cape Cod girls they have no combs
Heave away, haul away,
Comb their hair with codfish bones
We are bound for Australia.
Heave away my bully bully boys
Heave away, haul away,
Heave away and don't you make a noise
We are bound for Australia ....
Traditional sea chanty.

The island sat in a ring of stone and a nest of fog.

It was a flat and sandy land, treeless, silent, smooth and white. Its toothy wet escarpment looked like a good place to lay lobster pots, but the fishermen never did. The way to it was treacherous. Once there had been a bell-buoy marking where the secret rocks began their rise, but something had happened to it. Fog lingered round it. Its name on the sea charts was variously rendered as Seal Island or Silk Island. On some charts it was not named at all.

Douglas Murdoch saw it from the bedroom window.

He leaned out the window feeling the foggy wind on his cheeks, cool with the promise of winter. The Labor Day crowds were gone. The Turrets had hosted a few tourists, but most people didn't want to have to climb the paths from the ancient cupola'd guest house to the beach and the shops. Mrs. Alverson was negative about cars. There was no driveway up to The Turrets, just the rutted tracks laid down by Sally Ives' jeep. He heard from the kitchen below the sound of his seven-year-old daughter singing. It had been a good idea to stay here, he decided. They had

almost stayed in a slick hotel in the village. But the peace and isolation felt good to him, and Janna seemed happy. They were going sailing today, the second time. He gazed north at the boulder-strewn coast.

And saw the island for the first time as it floated in the morning fog.

He went, slowly, down the steep old stairs.

Janna said, "Mrs. Alverson had to leave and she said for you to get your own breakfast. I had eggs."

He opened the capacious refrigerator. Eggs, bacon, milk, butter. Salt, pepper, garlic. Onions. He took the smallest cast-iron skillet from the wall.

"Did you fold the quilts?" she asked him.

"I forgot."

"I'll do it." She slid off her chair. He could not get it through her head that Mrs. Alverson would do that, or else she did not want to relinquish the habit that her mother had taught her .... Laura. He pushed the weight and pain of memory away — the eggs. Look at the eggs, stir the eggs. They'll burn. *I hate burned eggs.*

In his head the voice was Laura's.

No, This would not be one of those days. Would *not* be. Would NOT.

Janna came down the stairs. "Da, where are we going today?"

"Sailing."

"*Where* sailing?"

Janna was important. Think of Janna. "I thought maybe north today."

"I want to see the windmill again."

On the first excursion they had gone south and seen an old battered mill, vanes still turning, though three of them were splintered stubs. A relic. God that's an ugly word. That was Laura now, a relic.

The windmill, think about the windmill. He had asked Sally Ives about it.

("The old Bigelow mill. It's been empty for years. It never worked well, the vanes kept breaking. The wind's too strong.")

"Wouldn't you like to see a new thing?" he asked Janna.

"*What* new thing?"

"Um. I don't know .... I saw a little island out in the fog, a little baby island, just right for two people to picnic on. We could go there." That was good, that was better. Janna nodded so hard that her black braids flew. He levered the eggs out of the pan and sat at the long wood kitchen table to eat. She brought him a napkin. "Thank you, lovey."

She leaned into him shyly. It hurt him that she was still so shy of him. *You lay four months in a hospital ward bandaged like a mummy, and she got to see you*

twice a day for five minutes; how could she be anything but shy of you? "Let's go to the island," she whispered.

They climbed down the steep cliffside path to the village. Janna ran ahead. Douglas took his time. The accident had left him with shattered legs. The doctors had rebuilt them, but the left was an inch shorter than the right, and both were full of metal bits and pins that ached when it rained, like shrapnel. He had spent a month learning how to walk at the rehabilitation hospital in Boston. He had only been out three weeks.

He caught up with Janna. She was sitting on a rock singing with great energy: "Fifteen men on a dead man's chest, Yo-ho-ho and a bottle of rum!"

Sally grinned at them when they came into the store. "Where you goin' today?" she asked Janna. She was an immense woman, six feet tall, 180 pounds and none of it fat. She ran the Emporium, the grocery and goods store in the village of Kennequit. She was forty, unmarried; she lived with her seventy-year-old parents in a small old house on a cliff. Mrs. Alverson had told Douglas that, and more, when she had told him that Sally Ives could rent him a boat. ("She owns two of them. She'll rent them to you — *if* you can sail.")

"To an island," said Janna. "Can I have a jelly bean, Sally?" There was a jar of jelly beans on the counter. Sally tipped it down. Janna hunted with concentration for a green one. She only liked the green ones.

"Which island?" Sally asked.

"I saw it from The Turrets window," said Douglas. "North of here, small and round and very flat, almost like a Pacific island. You know the one I mean?"

"Seal Island. I wouldn't go there. It takes some pretty fancy sailing."

"I'm not a novice."

"I know. You're renting my boat. The channels to it aren't marked and there are a lot of rocks around it. The water's shallower there than you might think."

"All right."

Janna was listening. "We can't go?" she said.

"Sorry, lovey. Sally says we better not."

"Have you been there?" Janna asked Sally.

"No." The woman's voice was almost gruff.

"There'll be other islands, lovey," Douglas said.

Janna nodded. Another child might have argued or wheedled. Janna accepted, stoic.

So she had looked at him, expressionless, shoulders set, when he told her Laura was not getting

better, was not coming home, was dead.

"Come on, lovey," he said to his strange girl, his bleak baby. "Let's go to the dock."

Kennequit harbor was famous. There were half a dozen picture postcards of it — at sunrise, at sunset, in fog — and one Early American painting which hung in a Boston museum. Sally's boats were named the *H2* and the *0*. The *0* was the small one. They raised the sails. Janna was serious and careful as she strapped herself into her life-vest. Douglas hated the bulky things.

He stowed his under the seat, close to hand. "Shall I untie the lines?" asked Janna. She loved nautical words and now called all rope *lines*, even pieces of string that had never touched water. They maneuvered slowly out of the marina. The wind was just right. It filled the sail. When they were clear of the other boats, Douglas handed the tiller to Janna. She steered lightly and surely, she was a natural sailor, better than he would ever be. He wished that Laura could see her.

His nerves knotted. Janna was singing. "Cape Cod girls they have no combs, Heave away, haul away, Comb their hair with codfish bones ..." Laura had taught her the song, sung it with her. The lonesome thin soprano rose again. "Cape Cod boys they have no sleds, Heave away, haul away ...." They had told him at the hospital that he had to forget, that he would forget. How *could* he forget?

"Janna!" he said.

She stopped.

No, he thought, you mustn't stifle her. You came here to make barriers dissolve, not reinforce them. Praise her. Tightly he said, "Go ahead, Jan. I like it when you sing."

She shook her head. She was watching his face. Her eyes were blue, like her mother's, just like her mother's. She had seen his pain and was guarding her tongue.

"I remember when mother used to sing that with you," he said. "Other songs too. You remember the Greenland whale song?" He tried to sing. "Oh, Greenland is a dreadful place, it's a place that's never green. Where there's ice and there's snow and the whale fishes blow —"

"That's the end," Janna said.

"Sing it."

She shook her head again. "Can we go look at the island?" she asked.

"Yes. We'll do that."

They nosed up the coast.

For no good reason, it was hard to find. Finally Janna steered straight at a blowy patch of fog, and there it was. Douglas caught

the tiller. They zigzagged around the island. It looked a perfect place to picnic. The fog stayed just offshore of it, and the bright autumn sun made the white beach glitter. There was an ethereal quality about the place. But except for the clinging fog there was nothing soft about it. It was white and sharp and as unshadowed as a piece of paper.

Then he saw her.

She was sitting on a rock, her feet in the spray. She wore a long thing like a caftan, and her hair fell around it, black and thick and long. She was not looking at him. He knew how her hair would feel .... His breath clogged in his throat. *No.*

She stood up. He slammed his fist on the gunnel. *She* —! She walked into the center of the island.

Her walk was a stranger's.

"Da!" said Janna.

Douglas wrenched his mind back to his daughter, the boat, the sea — they were too close. He tussled the boat away from the island. He kept wanting to look away, to look at the beach. The boat balked, it would not come.

"Let me," said Janna. She closed her hand round the stick. The boat turned like an obedient dog.

The fog blew in, hiding the island.

Douglas sweated. Laura was five and a half months dead; he ha lain beneath a car a foot from he helpless, trapped, and heard he die — but he had seen her, there He hit the gunnel again to make i stop. So there was another woma in the world with hair like thick an inky rain .... That someone, n Laura, was on the island. A loc woman, with a knowledge of th rocks and tides.

"Let's go back now, lovey," h said to his daughter.

"Well," said Sally, "did yo have fun?" She tipped the jell bean jar for Janna.

"Where'd you go today?"

"To the island," said Janna.

Sally looked at Douglas. "W just sailed around it," he sai hastily. "We didn't land. Jann really wanted to see it. There wa someone on it."

"Oh?" She was annoyed.

"A woman. With black hai Tall woman. Do you know who i might be?"

"Could be anyone. Some tou ist."

She was not going to help him He would have to ask Mrs. Alve son. He collected Janna. "Come or Captain."

Sally relented as they neared th door. "You want to take the boa out tomorrow?"

"We'd like to," Douglas said.

"Not that many more days o

good weather. You might as well take advantage of them while you're here."

"Thank you."

He had his hand on the door when she said, "What kind of a boat did she have?"

"Boat." He thought. "I didn't see it."

He was driving. His eyes felt like sand and his arms like lead. He had been driving for four hours. Laura sat beside him, frowning at the dark road, hands knotted in her lap. Her tension reproached and irked him. "Janna's all right," he said. She glanced at him, eyes like blue ice. The babysitter had called. Janna was feverish. They had been out on Cape Cod for a rare three-day vacation, just the two of them —

"All kids get fevers. Let's stay and call in the morning. It's a six-hour drive."

"No. I want to go home."

He argued.

"I want to go home."

The road was a monotonous strip of white, leading nowhere. Douglas rubbed his eyes.

The truck lurched out in front of them from the right. He had not seen the crossroads. The big sluggish station wagon squealed as he fought to turn the wheel. He smelled rubber. Laura screamed. Under his hands the wheel spun and the car seemed to leap at the wallowing whalelike tanker. They hit it ....

"I want to go home," she whispered to him. He could hear the drip, drip — reason and his senses told him it was the gasoline running from the car, not blood, not her blood. Her voice got fainter. "I want to go home, Doug."

"Laura!"

He clawed out of the dream. "Laura," he said. She was not there to hear him. She would never hear him. The pills were in the dresser drawer; they would put him out. Sweat coated him. He made himself stop shaking. He felt his way through the dark round room to the dresser. From the dresser to the door, from the door to the hall, to the bathroom, pills in hand — he took two. He would never forget. The doctors in Boston were crazy to think that he ever would, or could.

His dreams would see to that.

He went back to bed. He didn't try to sleep. The pills would make him sleep. He lay beneath the quilt and listened to the sea sound, rhythmic as the susurrus of cars on a highway.

In the next bed, his daughter slept, her breath even and untroubled.

The next day Douglas took the tiller. "Da, where are we going?" Janna asked.

"Oh, around."

They went north.

Douglas had no trouble finding the island.

She was there. She sat in the same place, maybe on the same rock. The sea surged roughly up. She seemed oblivious of the chill spray on her long legs. Maybe she owned the island. She sat there as if she owned it. He waited for her to see the sails and the tossing boat, to see him. He waited to see her face. She bent her head so that her hair hid her features wholly. She combed her hair.

"Janna."

"Um?"

"Look."

"What?"

"Do you see her? The woman?"

"I don't see anybody," she said. "Where is she, is she swimming?"

"No — there. On the island."

"No." She shook her head.

"Janna, look!" He didn't want to point. He caught her thin shoulder with one hand. "Look, there she is. She's combing her hair."

"I don't see anybody. There isn't anybody." Janna looked from him to the island. "Da, I don't like this game."

"Janna, this isn't a game. There's a woman sitting on the rock — she looks like mother! Can't you see her?" He couldn't believe her look of fright, confusion, innocence. He wanted to shake her. The denial seemed pointless. Was it because the woman looked so like Laura?

He would be patient. "Janna, honey, look there. Look again." The hands still moved, softly stroking. "She has black hair, she's sitting on that rock —"

"No!" said Janna, and burst into wild tears.

He had to turn the boat in order to comfort her.

"All right. All right, lovey, never mind. Never mind."

The psychiatrists in Boston would have fancy names for what she was doing. He cuddled her. Suppression, repression, avoidance. "I want to go home," she said into his knees.

"All right, lovey, we'll go home," he said. "Listen, we won't tell Sally we were at the island again today, okay. It will be our special secret. When she asks where we went, let's just say 'North.' Okay?"

"Okay."

"Well," said Sally, "where'd you go today?"

Janna's eyes were red and her nose was swollen, but she answered calmly, "North. Can I have two jelly beans, Sally?"

"Just north?" said Sally. She tipped the jar and looked at Douglas. *Nosey*, he thought.

"Just north," he said.

After dinner he spoke with Mrs. Alverson. "I think we'll go back tomorrow," he said. "We'll take off around noon. Maybe we'll come back next year in the summer."

She was stirring batter. "You do that. It's been good having you here, not like some. I'm making brownies. You want some to take with you on the road?"

"Oh, no, that's —"

"I'm making them anyway," she said. "For my grandkids. The youngest of them, Arabella, is three tomorrow."

He imagined her surrounded by grandchildren. She was all angles and bones, like her tall gaunt house. "Do they live here? In Kennequit?"

"My family's been fishing the Maine coast for 150 years, Mr. Murdoch."

"Then you must know just about everybody."

"They call me the Recorder," she said and grinned slyly. "Like the Recording Angel, you know? They call me that in church."

"Who is there in Kennequit with long black hair? A woman, I mean."

She shook her head, stirring, stirring. "Nope. Nobody I can think of. We're mostly blonds here. Swedes and Danes and Celts settled this part of the coast. Lots of Scots folks. Even a few Murdochs. Got any cousins in Maine?"

"No," he said. "The island? Seal Island?"

"Silk Island, we call it," she said. "I know it."

"It looks like a good place to fish."

"It isn't," she said. "Don't go there."

"Do you know who owns it?"

"Nobody owns it, Mr. Murdoch. It isn't a safe place. Nobody owns it."

He woke at dawn.

The house stayed compliantly still and silent as he dressed and limped down the stairs. The fog was thick and cold along the coast. Somewhere out on the sea the sun was rising. He walked down to the docks. Fishermen on their boats handling their traps watched him as he freed the *0* from her Moorings and coaxed her out into the icy bay. He didn't know any of them.

Janna was asleep. He would go and come back so quietly that no one would know he had been out .... He had to do it.

The fog twitched aside for him like a velvet grey curtain. He saw the island plainly: a white and shadowless space, glittery with quartz sand. He sailed around it. There seemed to be no good place to land. There had to be. He went round once more, looking for it. The fog smelled of salt and rain.

He saw her.

She was combing her hair. Her robe was green, like the sea. She was looking straight at him at last — he strained to see her face. The rising sun beat in his eyes.

He urged the boat a little closer.

She was singing.

"Cape Cod girls they have no combs ...." Clear and sweet and thin, it mingled with the ocean rush dinning at his ears. She stood up. "Comb their hair with codfish bones ...." She saw him at last. She waved, a curl of her hand. "Doug!" she called.

"Laura?" he said. He pointed the prow of the boat forward into the sun. "Laura!" Under his hands, the tiller bucked, the boat seemed to leap at the island. He felt beneath his keel the scrape and tear of the rocks. She was smiling. Water surged through the planking. He was close enough to see her eyes.

They were green as the seawrack, green as the beckoning sea.

At her feet lay the flotsam and jetsam driven up by the sea: wooden planks, a torn sail like feathers, rusty bolts, half hidden in the sand. A bleached shard of something that might once have been a shirt.

Why? he thought.

He tried to hold on to the rocks. *Why did I do this?*

The island sat in a ring of stone and a nest of fog.

It was a flat and sandy land, treeless, silent, smooth and white. Its toothy wet escarpment looked like a good place to lay lobster pots, but the fishermen never did. The way to it was treacherous. Once there had been a bell-buoy marking where the secret rocks began their rise, but something had happened to it. Fog lingered round it. Its name on the sea charts was variously rendered as Seal Island or Silk Island. On some charts it was not named at all.

COMING NEXT MONTH

An honest-to-goodness science fiction story from **Woody Allen,** who is, of course, the 237-year-old-man of **Sleeper** and the creator of **Annie Hall,** among many other things. Be on hand for "The Kugelmass Episode," featured in the December issue. Also, new stories by **Ron Goulart** and **Michael Coney**, and the exciting conclusion to **Charles Harness'** "Wolfhead."

A knight and a giant spider do battle with decidedly offbeat results in this new and engaging historical fantasy by Mr. de Camp.

Spider Love

by L. SPRAGUE DE CAMP

Sir Eudoric Dambertson, from whose spurs the gilding had not yet begun to wear off, sat in Castle Zurgau with his father, Sir Dambert of Arduen, and their feudal suzerain, Baron Emmerich of Zurgau. They spoke of the recent holdup of Eudoric's stagecoach, on its weekly journey from Zurgau to Kromnitch, by a band of masked robbers. After taking the passengers' valuables, the bandits had waved the coach on its way.

"From what ye tell me," said the graying-bearded Baron Emmerich, "'Tis certain that this be Rainmar's doing. Outlaws ordinary would have tortured the passengers and burnt the coach, to vent their spleen. But Baron Rainmar's a thrifty thief, not fain to slay the duck that lays the emerald eggs."

"That decided, sir," said Eudoric, young, dark, stocky, and square-faced, "what's to do? I'm not much more timorous than most, but I do not see galloping up to Castle Hessel, ringing my lance against the door, and daring Rainmar to fight it out."

"Aye, certes, thou hast right," puffed Sir Dambert. "By the God and the Goddess, he'd hang thee instanter. Time was when we'd saddle up and raid his robbers' hold in vengeance —"

"But no more," interrupted the baron, "now that the crown hath gathered so much power unto itself. Even Rainmar dares not raid openly, in his former wont. So, to sweeten's pudding, he doth these fribbling banditries."

"Well," said Eudoric, "can't you two lend enough men-at-arms to escort my coach, where the road passes nigh into Rainmar's domain? There were ten or twelve in the gang; so a dozen should suffice and a score be aplenty."

Baron Emmerich shook his head. "The king hath called upon me for a draft of men to help the emperor against the rebels in

Aviona. Praise the Divine Pair, he commanded not that my aging self take the field in person. The rest I need for the haying."

"The men of Aviona must be daft, to fight at the height of harvest," said Sir Dambert.

"Nay," said Emmerich, "they're farther north and so have already finished theirs."

"How about you, Father?" asked Eudoric.

Sir Dambert shook his head. "Aye, certes, would that I could help thee, but 'tis the same with me. I lack enough men to guard the castle as 'tis. I dare not strip it of all protection, lest Rainmar essay a sudden descent in spite of royal bans. Moreover and besides which, Rainmar hath a plenty of men, the which he feeds on the usufruct of's robberies. An we put on ten guards, he'll come at thee with a score; an we put on twenty, he'll summon up two score, eh?"

"A fine basket of grapes," snorted Eudoric, "when a harmless, law-abiding gentleman can't make an honest living. Let me think .... I recall the saying of the soldier of fortune, Karal of Gintz: 'If thou canst not vanquish them, unite thyself with them.'"

Dambert laughed gruffly. "Tell me not, son, that thou thinkest of turning reaver thyself!"

"Nay, nay. Methought a call upon the lord of Hessel and a friendly discussion might yield results. At least, it's better than driving the coach to Kromnitch empty of passengers, frightened off by fear of another ambuscado."

Emmerich said, "Have a care that he clap thee not up in's dungeon for ransom."

"Hath he not a daughter?" asked Eudoric. "Meseems I have heard of such an one."

"Aye," said Emmerich. "A veritably nubile daughter, whom Rainmar would dearly love to marry off. Trouble is, none of his noble neighbors'll countenance a union with this caitiff rascal. So Rainmar faces the choice of, imprimus, leaving poor Maragda an unwed spinster; secundus, of wedding her to one of his own knaves of low degree; or, tertius, of reforming his evil ways."

"Well, sir," said Eudoric to the baron, "since your lovely daughter jaculated me forth, I have been casting about."

"Eudoric!" cried Sir Dambert. "Thou shalt not wed into that family of banditti! I forbid it!"

"Easy, Father. I have no intention of wedding the lass, at least so long as Rainmar pursues his larcenous course. But think: if Rainmar accept me as a suitor, he'll be less fain to rob his prospective son-in-law's coach. With a call at Castle Hessel from time to time, we should be able to

keep the pot bubbling until the emperor settles his score with Aviona and our men-at-arms come home. Then we can do as we list."

Dambert gloomily shook his head. "Oh, thou art clever, son, cleverer than becomes a knight, forsooth. Thine estate of knighthood entails obligations —"

"Chide the lad not," said Baron Emmerich. "In these degenerate days, when a stroke of the pen oft outweighs one of a sword, we need all the cleverness we can get."

Baron Rainmar of Hessel, a huge, red-bearded, broken-nosed man, stared suspiciously at his caller, while behind him his men-at-arms gripped pikes and fingered crossbows.

"State thy business," he said.

Eudoric allowed his usually serious face a smile. He had been a little shaken by the sight of a row of Rainmar's victims — hanged, impaled, or beheaded — beside Rainmar's front gate. But he hid his feelings, saying:

"A neighborly visit, my lord. I've never seen your hold and must avow my admiration for its strength."

"When one hath mine envious neighbors — but is that all thou camest for? I can scarce believe —"

"Truth to tell," said Eudoric, "I have heard of your daughter, whose beauty is said to outshine that of the Goddess herself. Being myself unwed, methought a closer look might lead to better things."

Rainmar grunted. "Well, sit down, sit down. Ye may go," he told his cutthroats. "Witkin! Tell the Lady Maragda that her presence is desired. Now, then, Sir Eudoric, I've heard tales of thee: that thou hast adventured in far lands; that thou art hand in glove with mine old foe Emmerich; and that, despite thy gilded spurs, thou seekest gain by a most unknightly commercial enterprise: to wit, running a carriage-wagon betwixt Zurgau and Kromnitch. What sayest thou? Katilda! Wine!"

"As to the first," said Eudoric, "it's true I've journeyed to Pathenia. 'Twas there I learnt of this system of carrying men and goods from hence to thither, at regular intervals, for fixed fares. For the second, Baron Emmerich is my partner in the business. Who his friends and foes are amongst the nobility is his concern. And for the third, I hold that no trade founded on horses can be construed as base. Didn't the word 'knight' once mean simply 'rider'?"

"A doctor of law or theology art thou in spirit, I ween," growled Rainmar, "for all thy purported knighthood. Ah, Maragda, my dear! Here's a neighbor's scion, hight Sir Eudoric Dambertson, come to make thine acquaintance."

The tall, red-haired young woman curtseyed as Eudoric rose and bowed. When she sat, the conversation wandered off into weather, crops, the latest plague, an outbreak of witchcraft, and imperial politics. In parting, Eudoric received a guarded, grudging invitation to call again.

When at last he was cantering away on Daisy, Eudoric drew a long breath. At least, the robber lord had neither hanged him nor held him for ransom.

As autumn advanced and nights grew cold, Eudoric found himself calling more and more at Castle Hessel. As he had predicted, the robberies of his stagecoach had ceased. Moreover, he had come to like Rainmar's daughter Maragda. He was not, Eudoric told himself, really in love. He had been through that delightful and perilous state before, but the outcome had always been sad. Now he looked at such matters in a colder, more critical spirit. Calculation and expediency counted at least as much as the fleshly urges of a normal man in his twenties.

He noted, for instance, that Maragda's broad beam and exhuberant health promised healthy offspring. If, he thought, he could but find some means to persuade or coerce Baron Rainmar into giving up his career of rapine ....

On Eudoric's sixth call, however, Rainmar said bluntly, "A word with thee, Sir Eudoric, ere I allow a sight of my chick. What are thine intentions?"

"I had thought," said Eudoric carefully, "that, if she be willing, I should — as soon as mine own affairs render me able and worthy — enter a formal suit for her hand."

"Methought as much," growled Rainmar. "Thou hast things in thy favor, for all that thou art connected with the sniveling Emmerich. But thou also hast some in disfavor, which must needs be settled."

"Such as?"

"This new knighthood, for example. I'm told 'twas not for any knightly deed, but for base monetary considerations — that thou didst, in fine, bribe Emmerich with the offer of a partnership."

"No bribe, my lord. The two were quite distinct. I had the knowledge to launch our enterprise, Emmerich the gold. So we pooled them. For the other, I had done a deed of dought in slaying a dragon in Pathenia, although, because of distance, I couldn't trot out witnesses to the act. Ask the learned Doctor Baldonius whether the two yards of hide I fetched him from the East be not the integument of an authentic dragon." Eudoric refrained from

mentioning that, first, his attendant Jillo Godmarson had actually killed the beast; and second, Euroric had promptly been thrown in jail for violation of the Pathenian game laws.

"That may be." Rainmar ran thick fingers through his beard, in which a few threads of silver appeared amid the copper. "But I'm not quite satisfied. Dost thou adhere strictly to the code of knighthood: to be loyal to thy suzerain, protect the female kind, and so forth?"

"To the best of mine ability," said Eudoric.

"Hm. Well, now, I have a task for thee, which will test thy mettle. Accomplish it, and Maragda shall be thine. Knowest thou the deadly wood of Dimshaw, in the furthest reaches of my demesne?"

"Who doth not? What about it?"

"Hast heard of the great spider, whom we call Fraka, that haunts it?"

"Yea, and how she hath slain men who blundered into her webs. What —?" Eudoric, with sinking heart, realized what was coming next. It came.

"In fine, thy task is to slay this monster."

Eudoric gulped, acutely aware of the obligation of knighthood never to show fear, no matter how one felt. "Why don't you simply burn that part of Dimshaw where Fraka dwells?"

"That were to waste good timber, which I mean to cut to sell to the emperor's shipwrights. Besides, in a dry spell such as we now undergo, such a fire might get out of hand and devastate the barony. Nay, this is a task for one fearless hero — to wit, thyself."

"How shall I do this deed, sir?" said Eudoric, not feeling fearless.

"That's thine affair. Thou shalt, howsomever, do it in true knightly fashion. No magical sleights or base commercial tricks! I demand a proper stand-up fight, in accord with the ethic of chivalry. Mine own past may not have been utterly sinless," (which Eudoric thought the understatement of the century) "but my lass shall wed none but the purest and most unsullied gentleman of the realm."

Eudoric went to the forest dwelling of Doctor Baldonius, the local general practitioner of wizardry. Baldonius got out his huge, iron-bound encyclopedia and turned the pages of crackling parchment.

"Here we be," he said. "'Arachnida .... The class is remarkable for the variety of methods of copulation and fertilization. Among the Scorpiones, copulation takes place front to front by apposition of the genital

orifices of the two sexes, which are located forward on the underside of the cephalothorax. In the Opiniones ....' Let's omit those. 'In most of the Araneae, the terminal segments of the palpi of the male are modified into intromittent organs —'"

"Very interesting," said Eudoric, "but I would fain kill this creature, not make love to it."

"I shall come to that," said Baldonius. "'The females of most species of spiders readily seize and eat smaller specimens of their own kind. To avoid being thus devoured, male spiders have instinctive patterns of behavior to inhibit the cannibalistic tendencies of the females, at least until after copulation. Some perform courtship dances, displaying colored tufts on one pair of appendages.'"

"Forsooth, must I dance a fandango before Fraka, whilst waving a feather duster at her?"

"Nay. Be patient but a little longer. 'Among the web-spinning spiders, recognition is effected by jerks on the female's web, according to a code specific to the species.'

"Now let me think. Meseems I recall a little treatise on the codes of jerk of different arachnids, by Doctor Bobras, my old fellow-student at Saalingen. Ah, here it is."

Baldonius pulled a scroll out of the cabinet of pigeonholes, which held a score of books in this antiquated format. He unrolled it and scanned. "Here we be. 'Among the Gigantaraneae, the code is one long pull, two short jerks, one long pull, and two short jerks, followed by a pause before repeating.'"

"You mean," said Eudoric, "a kind of dum-deedee-dum-deedee rhythm?"

"Exactly, if mine ancient colleague be correct. If threatened by Fraka, ye may be able to halt her advance by jerking her web in that manner."

"Even though I don't look at all like a male spider? At least, it's not something complicated, which one might forget in the stress of the moment. But suppose I get a leg caught in the sticky web? From what I hear, it's the Devil's own task to cut oneself loose."

"The cure for that, my boy, is fire. Those webs quickly yield to flame."

"But if I must needs strike sparks into tinder with my igniter, whilst the Lady Fraka advances upon me —"

"Carry a lanthorn, with spare candles. If caught, lift the lid and apply the candle flame to the web. Fear not this great bug; *omne ignotum pro magnifico est.*"

"If a sudden gust blow out my flame, I shall be in no very rosy predicament." Eudoric mused:

"What puzzles me is, how these creatures make a living. One can see how an insect, having but little wit, can blunder into a spider's web. But one would think that beings of a higher order, such as birds, hares, and swine, would soon learn to avoid the entangling strands."

Baldonius shrugged. "I know not, neither, but Bobras says a spider can live for many months without aliment."

"And how is the race of these vermin propagated? Fraka is the only spider of her kind in the circumjacent demesnes. Albeit long-lived, she'll not live forever, even if I fail to terminate her existence. Whence would come her normal mate?"

"Methinks from the wilderness of Bricken, west of Rainmar's dominions. There, they say, dwell many uncanny creatures, which have vanished from more cultivated lands. Whether Fraka migrated thence to Dimshaw, or whether she already dwelt in Dimshaw when the intervening lands were cleared for farming, I know not."

"Hath she ever been seen outside of Dimshaw?"

"I think not. Once a spider of this family hath built its web, it strays not thence. If ye can learn aught of the habits of the Gigantaraneae in your quest, be sure to let me know. I can get a small monograph out of it, *saltem*."

"And," said Eudoric, "if I fail, be sure to see that I get a nice tombstone, *in absentia*."

Leaving Jillo to hold the horses, Eudoric plunged into Dimshaw on foot. He wore half armor and hip boots, with a crossbow slung across his back. The crossbow was of the simple stirrup type, cocked by putting one's foot in the stirrup and pulling back the string with both hands. It was more powerful than a longbow and also quicker to reload then a heavy steel siege crossbow, which required a winch or at least a cocking lever. While all this gear made Eudoric slow and clumsy, he thought that they would give him a better chance of escaping Fraka's fangs.

In one hand he carried a boar spear and a small storm lantern. The lantern's flame was hardly visible in the sunshine, which slanted through bare branches and trunks from the low autumnal sun. In the other hand he bore his cutlasslike hunting falchion, with which from time to time he blazed a tree to be sure of finding his way back. This was typical of Eudoric's methodical ways, which many of his class scorned as "tradesmanlike."

He spend the day in prowling Dimshaw without success. At nightfall, he and Jillo returned to

the village of Hessel West to sleep.

Withe the dawn, they were back at Dimshaw. This time, Eudoric had been plodding amid the ancient oaken trunks for an hour when something caught his foot. He almost fell sprawling but saved himself by a thrust of the butt of his spear.

He looked down but could see nothing. Nevertheless, his left boot was firmly held.

He struck with his falchion. The blade encountered some yielding, springy substance, to which it stuck fast. Pulling and twisting failed to tear it loose.

Eudoric thrust the point of his spear into the earth and set down the lantern. The falchion, which he had released, remained in midair, swaying gently. A rising breeze, which rustled the thick carpet of dead leaves, made the sword wobble more widely.

When he looked closely, Eudoric made out faint silvery gleams in the air. By moving his head, he discovered that these gleams formed a continuous streak. This streak began at the roots of an old oak beside him and rose slantwise into the branches above. The streak was tangent to the shin of his left boot and to the blade of the falchion.

Now Eudoric understood something he had not known: that Fraka's web was almost invisible. In full sunlight, one could see faint reflections from its surfaces, where the sun's rays struck it. In dim light, one could probably not see it at all.

This explained how Fraka could make a living from the beasts and birds of Dimshaw. Be they never so clever, they could not avoid the strands of a web they could not see. The forest was amply large enough to furnish game for a single spider of Fraka's kind.

Looking up along the line of sight of the strand of web on which he was caught, and moving his head, Eudoric made out more shimmering gleams among the branches. He was at the edge of a huge web, covering several acres. Then he saw something else.

A large, black, hairy object was moving briskly among the strands of the web and coming towards Eudoric.

Eudoric had a moment of panic. Fraka, he saw, had a body as big as a cask and eight hairy legs, each longer than a man is tall. As she came closer, it transpired that the strand of web to which he was caught was not the only one in that neighborhood. Several others slanted down to the ground nearby. If he had stepped over the one he had struck, he would have blundered into one of the others.

His first thought was that he must get loose from the web at all

costs. Taking up the lantern, he lifted the lid to apply its little flame to the strand that held him and the falchion. At that moment, however, the breeze — as he had feared it might — freshened and blew out the flame.

Lowering herself by the strands that slanted down to the ground near Eudoric, Fraka was now close enough for Eudoric to see the fangs that tipped her first pair of mandibles. A foot long each, they resembled the ends of a pair of bull's horns: dark, shiny, curved, and needle-pointed.

Eudoric thought of trying to struggle out of his boot. Without help, however, this would take more minutes than Fraka would need to reach him. He also thought that he just might be able to unstrap his crossbow, charge it, and get off one quarrel before Fraka reached him. If he failed to kill with the first shot, he would be doomed, tethered as he was. Perhaps a lusty thrust of the boar spear between the mandibles ....

While these thoughts flashed through his mind, he was fumbling for his igniter. The urge to get free of the web was still the strongest.

He brought out the little copper device. It consisted of a tinder box with an open compartment on top. Above that rose a little hammer bearing a piece of flint in its jaws. When one pulled back and released the hammer, it sprang forward and struck a piece of steel, sending a shower of sparks into the open compartment.

With shaking hands Eudoric pulled out the little drawer containing the tinder. Forcing himself to be deliberate, he put several pinches of tinder into the tray on top. Shielding the igniter with his free hand, he snapped the hammer.

The igniter missed fire. Fraka was now within reach of his spear, and another stride would bring her foremost legs upon him. Her eight eyes gleamed like great jewels, and her mouth parts worked hungrily.

Then Eudoric remembered the signal code. Frantically, he snatched at the hilt of his falchion and gave a series of tugs: long-short-short, long-short-short.

Fraka hesitated, her forelimbs poised above Eudoric. He repeated the jerks, again and again.

Instead of pouncing on Eudoric, Fraka reared back on her after four legs and spread the four forelimbs, as if offering her nether side to him. The spider's underside was buff-colored. The hairs on this belly were short and silvery instead of long and black like all the rest.

Eudoric repeated his jerks. Fraka remained immobile in her spread-eagled position. On her underside, just below the narrow waist, Eudoric saw what he

supposed to be her genital opening. It moved and worked as if in lustful anticipation. Otherwise, Fraka stayed motionless.

Eudoric's mind raced. He did not know how long he could make Fraka remain in her attitude of "Take me, I am yours!" Any time, she might get it into her cephalothorax that he was not, after all, her true love and eat him.

He could pick up the boar spear, which stood upright in the turf, and plunge it into her. That, however, would break the spell that held her, if anything would. If he failed to kill with the first thrust, she would finish him even though mortally hurt.

Fraka's four forelimbs twitched and moved, as if she were coming out of her nuptial trance. Eudoric jerked the falchion, and the spider again froze in position.

Stooping, Eudoric again shielded the igniter with his hand. Watching Fraka, he cautiously held the device below the strand of web that touched his boot. Then he waited for a lull in the breeze.

The wind took a long time to die. Eudoric had to jerk the web again to hold Fraka. As he did so, a sudden puff of wind blew all the tinder out of the tray of the igniter.

Cursing under his breath, Eudoric reloaded the tray. At last came a lull. Quickly, Eudoric snapped the hammer. The sparks spat into the tinder, which blazed up briefly.

The flame bathed the web for a few seconds. The web hissed and began to burn. Yellow flames ran up and down the strand, which parted with a sound like a snapping fiddle string. The falchion fell to the ground, and Eudoric found his leg free.

Eudoric snatched his spear and lurched back, out of range of Fraka's legs. Fraka came abruptly out of her trance. As a flame ran up the burning strand to one of her legs, she whipped around with surprising agility. She rapidly climbed up the remaining strands, by which she had descended.

Eudoric dropped his spear and unslung his crossbow, cocked and loaded the weapon, and aimed. The after end of Fraka's bulbous abdomen would have been an easy shot. But Eudoric did not shoot.

Fraka continued her scramble, growing smaller. The flame ran on up the burning strand to its junction with another. It became two flames, eating away the web in divergent directions, then three and four and six.

Fraka continued her flight until she was a mere dot in a distant tree. Some of the flames in the nearer parts of the web went out. Others spread but then they, too, died. A goodly part of the web had been destroyed.

Eudoric unloaded, unbent, and shouldered his crossbow. Guided by his tree-trunk blazes, he made his way back to the edge of the wood.

Baron Rainmar's mouth fell open. "Thou — allowedest — this — monster — to escape unscathed? No jest?" he gasped. "In the name of the God and Goddess, why? What demon of stupidity possessed thee?"

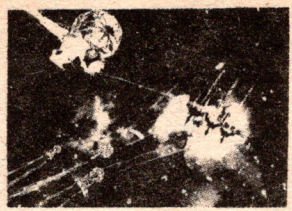
Eudoric smiled. "Well, sir, ere I set out, you lectured me on knightly conduct. You commanded me to adhere most punctiliously to the rules thereof. One such rule is to protect the female kind; another is not to betray one who hath given one her love.

"I'm no spider of the family Gigantaraneae, as Your Lordship can see. Yet it was patent that, as a result of my tugging her web, Dame Fraka saw in me her destined lover. She's not the sort of mate with whom I'd willingly consort; yet the fact that she was a female, who in her way loved me, let me from slaying her.

"Forsooth, 'tis not a matter of much pith and moment. Fraka confines herself to Dimshaw Wood. If you'd guard your folk from her, forbid them to enter the wood. She doth no harm where she is."

Rainmar struggled with his emotions. He tugged at two fistfuls of red beard. "Thou — thou — idiot! Ass! Fool! Witling! Incondite knave! I'll teach thee to play japes with me! Guards! Seize me this runagate! We shall see what sort of ransom —"

"Better not, my lord," said Eudoric, pointing at Rainmar's middle his crossbow, which, to lend color to his tale, he had cocked and loaded in narrating his adventure. "Hands off your weapons, sirrah. Tell your men to get out of sight.



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Now shall you accompany me until I'm safely on my way. If not, this square-headed bolt punches through armor plate at this range and makes a nasty wound."

Fuming, Rainmar preceded Eudoric out the front door, under the portcullis, and across the drawbridge to where Jillo held the horses. Eudoric kept his weapon trained on Rainmar's kidneys.

An instant later, Eudoric and Jillo were galloping away, while Rainmar screamed orders for pursuit.

The next time a band of masked robbers stopped the Zurgau-Kromnitch coach, a score of stout men-at-arms, lent by Sir Dambert and Baron Emmerich for the occasion and riding before and behind the vehicle, assailed them. The brigands lost five of their number. One of them lived long enough to tell, under torture, of having been sent out by Baron Rainmar.

Eudoric filed a civil suit in the imperial courts against the baron. The law being what it is, the suit was still wending its way through the maze of courts long after Eudoric, Rainmar, and all the others mentioned in this tale were in their graves.

At Castle Hessel, Maragda wept.

EPITAPH TO A PEDANT

A suicide was Roscoe Lee,
Driven to stupefaction
Trying to place an apostrophe
In the Fitzgerald contraction.

— *Sherwood Springer*

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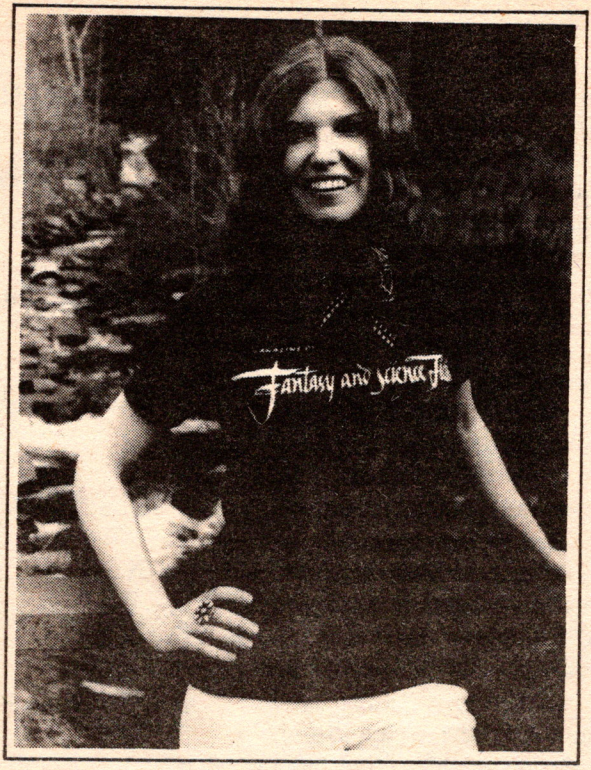

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STAR WARS II

The brouhaha over *Star Wars*, of course, has not subsided. Nor should it, necessarily. It is wonderful, I think, for all of us long time, deep-dyed science fiction fans to see a real work of s/f causing this fuss, getting this reaction, earning *all that money*.

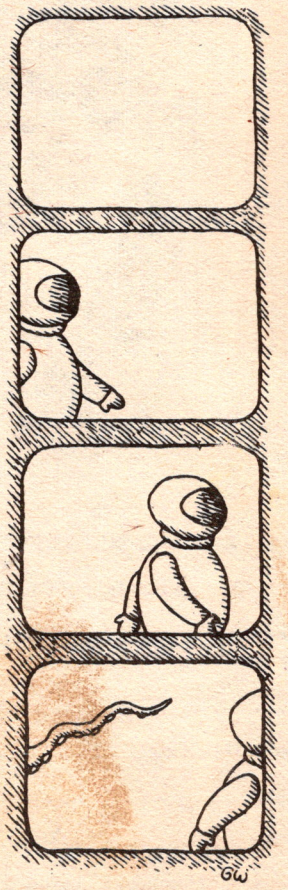
(I emphasize the last result, not because it is the most important to the value of the film, but because it is the one that will see the most results — more on that below.)

Various further reactions beyond those I talked about last month are interesting. I continue to be staggered by the number of people (s/f and non-s/f oriented) who love the film, and am therefore staggered by the few who don't.

They really boil down to two groups (predictably, when you think about it): the techie crowd, who disdains anything that isn't nutz'n-bolts-valid and has no appreciation of the romantic (Burroughs-to-Bradley) tradition; and the nouveau snobs, who have vast appreciation for, say, Le Guin's literary and intellectual values without in the least realizing *her* grounding in that very tradition also. (They're really one group — the poor things who have lost or never had a sense of wonder — who will never be twelve again. I pity them.)

BAIRD SEARLES

Films



On t'other hand, I am struggling against a certain backlash myself. I treasure and respect *Star Wars*; unfortunately it has been taken over by the adolescent cultists who are capable of fastening on one object until it is done to death (as was *Star Trek* for those unable to see beyond the teen-age yammering to the basic value of the show itself).

Star Wars may be the biggest single thing to ever happen to the field of science fiction. But the problem, for the public and for those of us who act as interpreters for the public (the word is really apologists, in the *dictionary* sense of the word, from *apologia*), is exemplified, I see on rereading, in the paragraphs above. It is science fiction's eternal aura of adolescense, and the positive *and* negative concomitants. And it's all there in *Star Wars.*

Science fiction *is* a young person's medium, by its very nature. It needs optimism, and flexibility, and the capacity to romanticize (again, in the dictionary sense of the word — to speculate imaginatively). Science fiction in the hands of the set, the settled, the rigid, would not be science fiction.

And this optimistic romanticism is what, I think, the mass, non-s/f audience is joyfully getting from *Star Wars*, after a decade of films dominated by a cynical and vicious violence.

But the problem that we are left with (and which has nothing to do with the movie, but only with the *reaction* to the movie) is that which the sophisticated lover of s/f has been wrestling with for a decade or more.

We know, but the mass viewers and reviewers of *Star Wars* do not know, that the youthful exuberance of Edgar Rice Burroughs, "Doc" Smith, and all of *Star Wars*' literary brethren can engender the social speculation of Le Guin's *The Dispossessed*, the anarchistically stylish *Triton* of Samuel R. Delany, the complex sexual and psychological questions raised by Marion Bradley in *The Heritage of Hastur.*

Until something like one of those is filmed, s/f will not get the "mature" mass image that we claim to want. (*2001* came close, but was disowned by half the s/f community — the older half — for its mystical and irrational elements.)

However, science fiction, which has been "in" to a degree for the past five years, say, is now about to get the full mass culture treatment, if only because *Star Wars* has proved that there's Big Money to be made there. Will science fiction survive? Will the culture survive?

Just in the short run, I hope that science fiction's acceptance by the culture will result in more good s/f

films, both of the fun kind *and* the sophisticated kind.

And that a broader based and more sophisticated following for science fiction might eliminate some of the *jejeune* aspects of the field, such as the provincially vociferous fanzine editorializing, or the conflict of interest involved in a small cadre of writers and editors continually reviewing each other's (and at this point, their own) books (so necessary when it was a small, incestuous field, so embarrassing now that it isn't).

And, perhaps, some of the more sophomoric noises from the younger fanatics.

But, please, don't let science fiction ever grow up entirely.

Things-to-come-dept .... All the above, however, may be sheer optimistic (?) blather. The first news in of the spin-offs of the box office bonanza of *Star Wars* is not encouraging. Oh, the studios are racing to cash in on s/f, but what are we to get?

Superman (from the comics); *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (UFOs); *The Cat from Outer Space* (Disney, of course); a remake of *When Worlds Collide*; an all new *Star Trek* series for TV; and various studios are dusting off old s/f (sic) properties like *Rocket Ship X-M* for new productions.

How's that for originality? Not one genre source among them, not even an adolescent romp with the potential of *Forbidden Planet.*

Oh, yes. We may be getting a new production (in color, of course) of *The Thing*, a movie so perfect for its time that *any* up-dating would be sheer disaster.

The one fact that the fat cat producers can't seem to see is the difference between *real* science fiction (which *2001* and *Star Wars* and, yes, *The Thing* all were in their wildly varying ways) and the stuff that's been passed off as s/f for most of the history of cinema.

George Lucas obviously knows the difference. Perhaps our only hope is the sequel(s) to *Star Wars*, reportedly already in production.

A gripping story about a woman who sees a strange pattern of accidents on California freeways, a pattern that suggests some sort of supernatural influence ...

Further Deponent Sayeth Not

by EDWARD WELLEN

My name is Maria Stabile, I am twenty-seven years old, I live at 34 Ruskin Place, Venice, California, in the County of Los Angeles, and I work as a court reporter, specializing in taking P.I. — Personal Injury — depositions.

Though this whole thing came to a head for me on the afternoon of May 1, 1979, it must have been at the back of my mind for a long time before that. But it came to the fore on that afternoon while I was taking down the pretrial testimony of a man by the name of Leo Urbanczyk ...

Maria Stabile listened to the questions and answers without listening. Her fingers listened for her. They played and plied the keys of the stenotype machine as if Rubinsteins's were dancing the Minute Waltz. While the defendant's words went in one ear and out her fingers, Maria sat away from herself in another part of her mind and thought a strange thought.

She didn't like to think it, because she liked to think of herself as being wholly without prejudice. Still, she couldn't help but notice that a very large percentage of the Personal Injury depositions she took — automobile accident testimony preliminary to trial — had a plaintiff or a defendant who was, like this Leo Urbanczyk, foreign-born.

What drove it home to her now was that this was not the first deposition she had taken down from him in the past year. It was not the second. It was the third. And she was not the only court reporter around, and so the chances were good that Leo Urbanczyk had been the defendant in even more automobile accident cases.

And what heightened her awareness and added to her feeling of *wrongness* was that on the previous occasions Leo Urbanczyk

had groped for the right words; yet this time his statement came out less haltingly, though still in his strong accent. It was as though he had gone over the same ground a number of times, in the same grooves of his mind. He might have been a benumbed actor far into a long-run play.

"... and I am passing the interchange and I see now I will have to go soon right away into the off-ramp — yes? — and I make so with my hand and with the light on my car to show I mean to cross into the right-hand lane. But I guess this man in the car behind me doesn't see my hand or the light and he ...."

She had heard that same string of words before. She felt sure Leo Urbanczyk had spoken them before and she had taken them down before.

Her fingers flew, seeming to know on their own what he was going to say before he said it.

And he began to watch her fingers as if they hypnotized him. He grew more and more tense and spoke faster and faster. Then all at once he broke off and pointed to her.

"Excuse me," he blurted out, "but she's going so fast I can't keep up with her."

Even the plaintiff's attorney had to laugh at that, and Maria herself smiled.

But she felt ashamed somehow. Had she conveyed by frown or headshake her feeling of wrongness? Was that what had shaken Urbanczyk out of his rote performance? Had she been that unprofessional? She made her face a mask and her figure motionless but for the flying fingers. And without further ado or undo Leo Urbanczyk finished his deposition, and the session broke up.

That should have been the end of it for her but it was not. And because it was not, because she found herself wondering about the guilt or innocence of Leo Urbanczyk as she watched him limp out, her shame arose anew. She was not there to weigh or to question, she was there only to take down testimony. She was an impersonal instrument of the law.

True, till they totally mechanized or robotized the procedure, this instrument was flesh and brain cells and could not keep from having its own thoughts and second guesses. But that didn't mean she had to be the one to pass judgment on the man.

If, on the one hand, he had more than his share of traffic accidents, where was the Bureau of Motor Vehicles in all this? Were the public watchdogs sleeping? Why hadn't they lifted his license?

But the scales of justice had another pan. Leo Urbanczyk was a

traveling salesman — a drug manufacturer's detail man — and his livelihood depended on his having a driver's license. Was it likely he would deliberately court accidents? Was it the man's fault he had a run of bad luck?

She watched him hobble out and winced sympathetically. ("After other car hit me, back was aching me, neck was bothering me, and I was having headaches. And my ankle was swelling, I had a swelling on the ankle.") She felt her face burn at the thought that his thick accent ("Well, I learned a little, my English, in my country. Since I come here, my language better now.") had led her to think her first strange thought about the reason for his accidents and for those the other foreign-borns found themselves in. She determined to drive the strange thought from her mind.

It was the half of his smile that showed as he turned left just outside the door to go down the hall that did it, that undid her feelings of shame and sympathy and deepened and quickened her interest in the reason for the accidents.

It had to be more than a matter of ineptness or carelessness. Urbanczyk struck her as being a quite capable man with a strong drive to succeed. If it came to that, foreign-borns took more care in most things that native-borns because they tried hard to make up, to be part. Foreign-borns were generally more law-abiding, more flag-waving, than native-borns. Native-borns took liberty and justice for all too much for granted. Even to get a driver's license would have been harder for Urbanczyk; he would have had to prove himself to a skeptical or even a biased inspector.

So it went deeper than competence. It went deep into the mystical nature of man.

The idea had been kicking around in her for a long time, but it was a hard birth because it meant she would have to bring out into the light the concept of extrasensory perception.

All right, this was California, and she should have been used to the craze in the air that matched the craze in the earth. Out here you breathed nutty notions all day long. But it made her queasy to think there might be such a thing as ESP.

She felt a need to keep her own mind inviolate. Not that she had nastier thoughts than everyone else. If you laid her inner landscape open to the light of day, it would not show itself any more of a garbage dump than the run of human wishes, fears, hates, greeds, and vanities. But it was hers, and its place was the dark oubliette of her mind.

Still, if there *was* such a thing as ESP, and if it explained this

uncanniness she felt about Urbanczyk and the other foreign-borns, then she had to face it, especially when the pattern forced itself on her.

... seemed to see a pattern. The key to it is that a very large number — a mathematician would probably say a significant number — of the depositions I take have a plaintiff or a defendant who is foreign-born, whose first language is not American English. Even those who do not require an interpreter during the taking of their testimony would, all the same, be people who think in another language.

Freeway traffic in California is, to begin with, so fraught with perils in lane changing, sudden slowling, and so on, that the mathematical odds (I'm guessing, but feel sure this is true) say that there should be many, many more accidents than there are in actuality.

Why don't these mathematically probable accidents occur?

Because, unknowingly, we all use ESP. Driver tunes in to driver. We take more than mere kinesic cues from each other. On some underpass of the mind there's a free interchange.

But if you're thinking in another language, you're not communicating, not sending or receiving clearly or quickly enough. You would respond too late to the other driver, or the other driver would fail to catch your intention in time. Result: questions and answers in deposition form.

Which brings me back to Leo Urbanczyk.

His case cried out for looking into.

But, being a court reporter, I could not myself look into the matter....

His smile hung in the air before her. It was not a malicious smile. It might even have been a sad smile. But it was a knowing smile. It said to her that Leo Urbanczyk knew more than he had yielded up under the plaintiff's attorney's questioning.

Yet she felt guilty even to be thinking of investigating. The law strictly forbade a court reporter to investigate.

What she needed was someone else to pick it up and look into it.

Almost as if her need had materialized him, Joe Fiveash appeared. Joe covered the criminal courts for the Los Angeles *Dispatch*. He covered the field for Joe Fiveash.

"Maria! I was just thinking about you."

"What were you thinking?" Her face felt hot, and though she held her smile, she cursed her tongue for giving him that opening.

"As though you didn't know." He looked her up and down. "I was

thinking of your shining intellect."

"Those are my boots shining down there."

"A shining mind in a shining body."

She shook her head but the smile stayed in place. She liked everything about him but the fact that the whole was less than the sum of the parts. He lacked an overall seriousness. Of attitude, of purpose.

They had played a one-night stand, but that had been the beginning and the end of it. She was old-fashioned enough to want a one-woman man. But she knew him to be a good investigative reporter. Right now that was what she stood in need of.

She dropped the smile. "Joe, would you be free to follow up a lead? There may be something in it, there may not."

He grinned but looked suddenly sharp. "Lead thou me on."

"Give me a lift home; I'll fill you in on the way."

"Where's your car?"

"Getting a ring job."

He took her hand. "Come with me while I get my car. I sure don't want to lose you now."

They sped along the freeway. She found it a white-knuckled ride because Joe kept his eyes on her more than on the rushing road. The scratches and dents she had seen on his car on getting in hadn't helped unfurrow her brow, though, as far as she knew, Joe had never been in a serious accident. She tried to distract him toward the traffic flow.

"That's the sort of thing I'm referring to: notice how everyone's doing his own number and yet how all are doing one big number?"

He smiled into her eyes and nodded and smoothly swerved to save his fender from a car that cut into their lane.

She invited him up for a drink that turned into a potluck dinner and would have turned into more if she hadn't worked at turning him off.

"Joe, be serious."

"I'm serious. I'm blooming serious. I'm night-blooming serious."

"Not that way. I mean, here I am, trying to talk to you person-to-person, and there you are, making a man-and-sex-object thing out of it. Have you even been listening to my theory and to what I've told you about Mr. Urbanczyk?"

He reached out a hand to her and slapped it away with his other hand. "Of course. See how I'm behaving myself?"

"And you're going to look into it?"

"Of course. And, scout's honor, I won't be counting on any thanks from you because I'll only be doing my job." He spoiled it by crossing his scout's fingers and winking.

She let out a sigh and handed

him a slip of paper.

"Here, I've put down his name and address and his license tag. You will let me know what you find out?"

"Oh, I'll keep in touch, all right. You can bet your life on that."

... and Mr. Fiveash did keep me informed as he had promosed ...

He stopped by the following evening.

"I had a few chores to take care of that ate into my lunch hour. But then I got on the horn to a very friendly woman I know in the Division of Motor Vehicles — *very* friendly, not stand-offish like someone I could name — and got her to pull the record on this Urbanczyk and to read it to me." He shot a look at Maria. "There was nothing to read."

She started to speak but he put up his hand. "Are you sure you got the name right?"

"Am I sure?" She stared at him. "Sure I'm sure. What do you mean there was nothing to read?"

"Just that. If this is your Leo Urbanczyk — and that must be the case because it's the one and only Leo Urbanczyk — there isn't one violation, not even a standing violation, to blot his record."

"That can't be."

"Maybe it can't be, but it is. Only thing I can think of is that the computer that's supposed to post Leo's violations slipped up. Funny, though, that it should fail to record all three — that how many you said? — accidents."

"At least three. Yes, funny. What're you going to do now?"

"Keep digging. Just thought I'd check with you before following up computer angle."

He checked with her again the next evening. Her eagerness turned to worry as he plopped down. She sensed what was coming.

"Rang up my friend at the DMV." He huddled against an arctic wind. "She's all at once not very friendly. Icicles dripped from the receiver. I asked about the computer, and she said there was absolutely nothing wrong with the software or the hardware and if I wanted any more info I'd have to go through channels and she was awfully sorry but she was terribly busy now — and, I gathered, into the foreseeable future — and she had to hang up."

He gave a half smile. "There was a double click on the line. That kind of gave me the notion someone — her supervisor? — had monitored the call. I turned to one of my police contacts. Police have a direct patch to all DMV computer info. The computer does give Leo a clean bill." He shrugged and picked up his drink.

She looked him in the glass. "So you're dropping the story?"

He waited longer than it took him to swallow before he answered. "I'm sorry we never really got into the person-person bit. But if you know anything about investigative reporters, you know *that* was the wrong way for the DMV to get me to drop the story."

"I'm sorry, Joe."

"Yes, we're a sorry pair. How about gladdening up at a discotheque?"

The discotheque proved three hours of pleasure, and her body and mind still hummed, but she staved off the good-night kiss for a moment of business.

"How are you going to follow up the story?"

"Only way to follow it is to hang onto friend Leo's rear bumper."

She didn't know why but, her lips still buzzing with the kiss, she called out after him silently: Be careful, Joe.

... Mr. Fiveash's findings, as far as they went, disappointed me ...

"I spoke to a girl at his insurance company and got the name of the body shop they like to do business with. I went there and found out there's no record that Leo's car's been in for repair a great number of times in the past few months. The boss came in while I was trying to get a mechanic to talk. He threw me out. Said I was interfering with work. I guess I was."

Something was wrong. Joe's gaze was too fixed, he was trying too hard not to look away from her, trying to meet her gaze frankly. But behind his gaze was a curious reluctance, a holding back, a leaning toward doubt.

"Joe, I wish I could show you carbons of the deposition transcripts. But you know that's somewhat privileged information. You'll just have to take my word against the computer's and the body shop's. There are three accidents I know of. So something's fishy."

Joe seemed barely to listen. "Yes, well. I only wanted you to know I haven't just been spinning my wheels. I have to find out things my own way. I found out a few other things. All Leo does all day long — with time out for meals, rest rooms, and depositions — is drive on the freeway."

"But his job —"

"A neighbor told me Leo confided he's on a leave of absence from his firm. It seems the company doctor diagnosed a nervous condition and the therapy is to forget business and get out in the open air."

"Open air? The freeway's a sea of exhaust fumes."

"So he's a gas head. You want the carnage knowledge, don't you? Then hear me out." She made a gesture of surrender and he went on, his eyes daring her to interrupt

him again. "I tailed him for better than three hours, looping the loop on the freeway, and I tell you Leo is one crazy driver. I hung a couple of cars back and wished there was more distance between his and mine. To watch him in action is enough to make you believe the Neanderthals are still among us."

He shook his head. "It isn't that Leo breaks the law in any way you can pinpoint. It's that he's quick to change his mind and slow to signal the change. Dozens of times I saw near misses and a few times actual scrapes and bangs. Leo blue-blazes a trail of curses and horns."

"There."

"Yes, but where is there? Does that bring us anywhere nearer the truth? Look, suppose he is involved in a lot of accidents. What does that prove? That a difference in culture, in mind set, blocks ESP? Interferes with reception? All it proves to me is that Leo's a lousy driver."

Joe's tone changed. He was trying to sell her something. What and why? And though he didn't look away from her as he spoke she felt his gaze shift focus. If he was telling her the truth, why should he be ashamed to face her?

"Maria, did you stop to think that maybe the guy's simply accident prone, that maybe he has a strong death wish? No question about it, they should lift his license. But that doesn't mean there's anything more to the story."

"What about the computer's failure to post Urbanczyk's accidents, and what about the stonewalling at the motor vehicle bureau?"

He shrugged. "Usual bureaucratic foulup and coverup."

"What it comes down to is, you think my ESP notion is crazy."

"I didn't say that."

"You thought it."

"How do you know I thought it? ESP?" He laughed a forced laugh. "Woman bites newshound. Way you snap at me makes it clear you're taking this whole thing altogether too seriously."

She didn't laugh. "Joe, I hate to say this, but I don't believe you're telling me the real reason you're dropping the story. You have something else on your mind."

His lids went up and his lips went down. "I'm only trying to tell you —"

"You're trying to tell me this is as far as you'll take it."

He sighed. "Even if I wanted to take it all the way, saw any hope some good would come of taking it all the way, this is as far as I *can* take it. At least for the time being." He leaned nearer. "It's supposed to be hush-hush, but I see I have to let you in on it. My publisher's sending me on a Defense Department junket that's just come up. A round-the-

world tour of our overseas bases. It's a once-in-a-lifetime chance. I can't pass it up."

"A city hall reporter on a world junket?"

His cheek twitched. "You mean you think I'm only good enough to cover local news?"

"I know you can handle any assignment, Joe. I mean it just looks funny for this to be coming up now out of the wild blue yonder. I mean, doesn't it, honestly?"

"Speaking of funny, isn't it pretty far-fetched to tie the Pentagon in with this Urbanczyk thing? Do you really believe they'd go that far to get me off the Great Freeway Conspiracy?"

"Don't you? I'm beginning to think the biggest story is right here at home."

"Come on, Maria. Forget about this mysterious They and Their sinister motives. There is no They. There's only Us."

"You're the one who first said They."

"I was only saying what was in your mind. I don't believe in a conspiracy theory of history. That story has more miles on it than the one about the wife who pulls away unaware she's left her husband standing in his underwear after he's stepped down out of their trailer to ask why the sudden stop."

She didn't smile. Someone had scared him off or bought him off. She had never thought she would ever think that of Joe. She remembered with a flush that she had worried for him. *Be careful, Joe.* She pressed her lips together.

... so when Mr. Fiveash had to drop the story to cover a bigger one, I thought I would have to resign myself to forgetting about it ...

Whenever she remembered it, and that was more often than not, in the night and day that followed, she conjured up Leo Urbanczyk's nebulous nebbish face and the sinister conspiracy faded. But when the face faded, in turn the half smile — malicious, no; sad, maybe; knowing, yes — lingered on the air or on the retina.

It didn't take much — a colleague's casually concerned "You look like you need rest" — to make her take not sick but sick leave.

Bright and early the next day, but feeling foolish and sluggish, she found herself driving toward Leo Urbanczyk's neighborhood. For some reason it did not surprise her that she had timed it right. As she neared his apartment building, he pulled out of the basement garage.

It was Urbanczyk she recognized and not his car, but one glance at the car made it a cinch to spot again. It had a new right-rear fender that had not yet got its coat of matching paint over the raw red prime coat.

She was *not* investigating. It

was sheerest coincidence that she found herself going the same way as Mr. Urbanczyk and getting on the freeway at the same time and place. And why shouldn't she be taking the freeway? After all, the freeway was open to all comers and goers. She told herself that and told herself to believe that.

And if she followed the lead of Mr. Urbanczyk in pursuit of her own course of open-air therapy, it was only that it seemed the path of least resistance. She kept a few cars — and, frighteningly but helpfully, a trucker's monster double rig — between them.

If anything, Joe's description of the man's driving style had been on the kind side. And in Urbanczyk's case practice made imperfection perfect. He repeated the same mistake again and again.

Unvaryingly, he sped along in a left-hand lane, and at the last minute he would suddenly opt for the right-hand lane reserved for the airport turnoff. Each time — and she had to marvel at herself that she had not lost him; she was grateful that the ring job seemed to have made a big difference: it was a more smoothly responsive car than it had ever been — each time, as he cut sharply across and slowed abruptly, the gunmetal-blue photochemical smog grew a deeper, more sulfuric blue, and the background hum and whine gave way to a crescendo of screeches and bumps.

And it happened always at the same spot. The San Diego, Santa Monica, Harbor, Santa Ana, Hollywood, and Golden State Freeways form loops oceanward of Dodger Stadium. Urbanczyk drove these loops, making his involuted way back to his last-minute exit down the same off-ramp.

Something else forced itself on her notice as a fixture at the same spot. Off on the shoulder the same stalled car gasped for air with its hood. And the same man, a noticeably nondescript person sat at the wheel. A CHP tag fluttered from the whip antenna to show that the Chippies had properly responded. By now, surely, the repair truck should have come to fix the car or tow it away.

Maria grew cold enough to switch off the air conditioning. *Joe, you should be here.*

But he wasn't here. She was all alone. In the great stream of traffic, of human life, with the car radio's music and commercials and news and Sig-Alert interruptions telling of Freeway troubles, she was all alone. She had to smile at herself, boxed in as she was at the moment by a couple of double rigs, but it was an uneasy, uncertain smile.

One more time around, to make sure the pattern held, then she would break off and go home and sit down and try to make sense out

of what she had seen. They were rolling along the San Diego Freeway now, coming up on the LAX turnoff. Maybe it would not happen this time. Maybe it had never happened. Maybe she had been dreaming. It was all too unreal. She felt numb, off-balance, dazed. Maybe it was the freeway divider posts flashing past: quite often that pulsing could set off a minor storm — environmental epilepsy — even in nonepileptics.

If it was real, if it was really happening, in another second Urbanczyk should make his move, cut across the slower lanes toward the turnoff. She had put only one car between them now, the better to watch. Urbanczyk made his move.

The woman driving the Chevy in the far right lane had failed to notice Urbanczyk's belatedly blinking tail light. He swung in front. They were too close. His sudden slowing would catch the woman short. It would be the stuff of depositions — if they remained alive to depose.

Maria shrieked a silent *Stop!* at the woman.

The Chevy braked sharply, with a springy nosing down and rearing up, and a long strip of beads slid down to that knot. Maria swept on past the point of pileup, not trying for the turnoff though the way was now clear to follow Urbanczyk down the off-ramp. That was enough of Urbanczyk for one day. This last had taken something out of her, and she could imagine how drained the woman at the wheel of the Chevy, a Chinese-looking woman, must be feeling. Maria's rearview mirror showed her the man with the stalled car on the shoulder dwindling but not to meaninglessness. But that was enough of him too for one day.

It made the papers:

JUST CAN'T GO ON,
STOPS ON FREEWAY

Lisa Wu's woes suddenly grew too much for her. She stopped her car right where she was.

A thousand other cars stopped too — because Ms. Wu had halted at an exit ramp of the San Diego Freeway.

Police said she was sitting behind the wheel, her five senses shut off, oblivious to the honking horns of a long line of cars jammed up in yesterday's rush-hour traffic. Rubbernecking slowed traffic flow in the other lanes as well, creating monumental tieups.

Ms. Wu, 29, explained at Hollywood Receiving Hospital that woe had piled on woe till all at once she felt she just couldn't go on. All she remembers about yesterday's episode is that an inner voice told her she must stop and she obeyed it. She said that in addition to the difficulty of adjusting to American ways after living her life till recently

in her native Taiwan, she worried about the rent hike on her curio shop and about falling behind in her car payments.

A doctor said that Ms. Wu had an "anxiety reaction" — like combat fatigue.

When I came across that item in the morning paper, it really hit me hard. In a way it argued for me, and in a way it argued against me...

Maria read it over toast and eggs and orange juice and a vitamin pill and smiled wryly. The Stabile theory would seem to have held up — up to but not including the last second. Three-way cutural interference — Polish and Chinese figures on an American ground — blocked what Maria would call *natural* ESP and nearly did an untuned-to-an-Urbanczyk's-wavelength Ms. Wu in. Yet the inner voice was there, and at the last second it had been strong enough to override the interference and save her — though after the fact, rationalizing it with the doctor's help, she had of course misinterpreted it.

Was there such a thing as cultural interference? If you looked at it hard, would it fall apart? Was what had seemed a pattern ruling out the foreign-born exceptions merely a chance run of statistics? That could wait working out.

And it still didn't tell her what Urbanczyk's deadly game was. The death wish Joe had put forward?

Maybe it was as simple as that, and *she* was simple to try to make something complex out of it. She shook her head at herself.

Whatever it was, it was not a matter for her but for the authorities. It was up to them, not her, to catch on to and up with Urbanczyk and to deal with him.

What of the man with the stalled car? No doubt there was a simple and logical, if not innocent, explanation for him too.

Same would likely hold true of Joe's junket.

A strange run of coincidences, though.

She smiled wryly again. Keeping on with that line of thought could bring on an anxiety reaction like Lisa Wu's. It had been a sleepless night for her, and a great weariness weighed her down, and she was in no shape to follow her thoughts. She would certainly not follow Urbanczyk again today. She would not get dressed and go out. She would finish breakfast and go back to bed. Best thing for her to do was sleep it off.

The skyline had the loose jagged pattern of sleep spindles on a graph. Her hands gripped the wheel of a car. A cyclorama of Los Angeles burning in the sun rolled past. She felt fear. She had made the mistake of tailgating Leo Ur-

banczyk's car — the form hunched over the wheel told her the driver was Urbanczyk. She and Urbanczyk were two holes moving through a semiconductor, and neither of them now could stop the memory of what would happen.

A sign passed, unread. The familiar exit ramp was coming up. Urbanczyk would cut in and out of lanes, would slow suddenly, would flash his turn signal as an afterthought, would ....

Here was the exit ramp — but a road crew had blocked it off for repairs. *He sees he has to change his mind. He's going to cut back across lanes for the next interchange on the left. Don't wait for his signal. You're going to hit. Spin the wheel hard left, then hard right. Stand on the brakes.* The wheel throbbed as the car answered. The car slewed, scraped, fishtailed, skidded into the guardrail. The horn stuck in a blare as the world blanked out.

She sat up to match her sitting up in the dream and awoke. She had been at the wheel not of her own car but of Joe Fiveash's.

Without thinking, without having to think, she swung out of bed, threw a robe on over her pajamas, stabbed her feet into slippers, grabbed her car keys, and slammed out. Deaf to the startled hello of her curlered neighbor carrying a wet-bottomed bag to the hall incinerator chute, she ran to the stairway because the elevator wasn't standing by. She tripled down the stairs and out to her parking space. She revved up and torqued out of there.

It was blazing day as in her dream. She did not have to think where she was heading. Her car seemed to drive itself to intersect the San Diego Freeway at Urbanczyk's favorite exit ramp. She parked any which way in the street at the nearest point to it and climbed up the embankment to the freeway.

There was the exit ramp, blocked off as in her dream, and there was the road crew standing around watching the cops, the firemen, and the ambulance attendants. Urbanczyk was not there; he had roared on oblivious to the carnage behind him. But there off on the shoulder was the man with the stalled car. He stared at her.

She looked at him briefly, then past him to the flashing red light, the black skid marks, the shattered glass, the spill a fireman was hosing away. She forgot him: gratitude swelled: very great gratitude — Joe was alive.

The ambulance attendants were easing Joe onto a stretcher beside the crumple of his car. She ran along the guardrail to where he lay. She leaned over.

"Joe."

Joe opened his eyes a flicker

before she said it. "Had a feeling you were here." He smiled. "Maybe I should've gone on the junket after all."

"What happened to it?"

"You happened to it. You made me feel so guilty ... about letting you down ... that I pulled out of the junket at ... the last minute. Played sick." Sweat glazed his smile.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"Keep you out of it ... in case ... anything to it ... conspiracy-wise. Silly, huh? Just damn lousy freeway drivers ... including me." He grimaced, then hurried to reassure her. "I'm all right. Knocked wind out me ... more than anything else."

She felt his pain. Cracked a couple of ribs, more likely.

"Look, lady, you can talk to him later at the hospital."

"Yes."

She watched the ambulance take him away but not out of her life. She turned. The man of the stalled car was coming toward her. He smiled at her and gestured a wish to speak. She moved as if to meet him, then broke and ran past, losing her slippers in her run down the embankment to her car.

... I hurried straight home. Once here, the very first thing I did was to start putting it all down ...

She stopped typing to listen. The door was solid, but from the other side a presence seemed to throw its shadow through. She tore the paper from the typewriter and slid it under a cushion.

She got up to answer the ring.

The doorbell rang.

She opened the door.

It was the man of the stalled car. He did not seem too surprised at her readiness. He held her slippers out to her.

"Cinderella, I presume?"

"How did you find me? Oh, of course. My license tag. You're Pentagram, aren't you?" Slip of the tongue. Was it because she all at once felt like a witch? "Pentagon, I mean."

He nodded. He set the slippers down to get out a small leather folder. She barely glanced at his ID.

"That's what you were doing at the exit ramp, wasn't it? Spotting the tags of those drivers who could anticipate the moves of the ... accident provokers."

He nodded again. "We need a few people with the rarest combination of qualities — not merely with ESP that can override cultural differences but with magnificent reflexes, with a feel for mechanical devices, and with nerve, judgment, and stamina. People who may not even know they're people like that. People like you."

She saw that coming, but she could not pull back from the shock of it. She shook her head, not

because she did not believe it but because she was not sure she wanted to believe it.

He paid no mind to that but eyed her puzzledly. "I know I've seen you before today. Subliminally." He snapped his fingers. "Got it. You've been tailing Urbanczyk."

Her turn to nod. No need to tell him he had got it because she had thought it at him. Her nod turned to a shake.

"Poor Urbanczyk. I suppose you appealed to his patriotism."

"Of course."

"Doesn't it bother you? Not that, but the reckless endangerment?"

He looked honestly surprised. "It's the old tale of ends and means. We're playing for high stakes."

"It isn't a game. It's life and death."

"Still a game. The universe runs by chance. Probability. The uncertainty principle. I don't want to be flip, but it's all a tossup. Only way to beat it is to better the odds. ESP may just be the answer. God knows we need some saving grace."

She listened to him with part of her mind. Another part of her mind ranged ahead, getting over the newness, realizing the strangeness she would have to live with from now on. Her feelings about Joe had not changed. Her feelings about her feelings had changed. Funny, because it had been Joe's peril that had triggered her latent talent. She was different from Joe. Not man-woman different. Sense different. She would see him, be with him from time to time. But they could never be one. Not when one of the two would always feel and know something the other could never feel and know. Funny, too, now it was she who was the one who could not conform. Poor Joe.

The man was waiting for her answer. She suddenly saw his question: scooped-out mushroom cloud, fuzzy questionmark. And she saw a projection of the globe and on it a stippling of ICBM sites. She understood there was a vital

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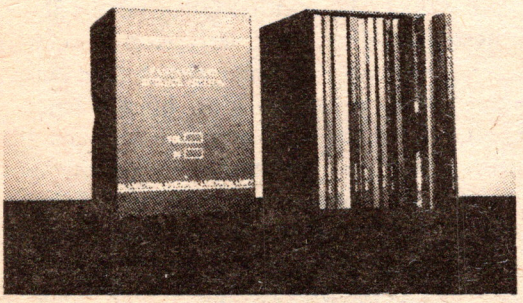
need to know the targeting and launching intentions of foreign missilemen. She could feel her mind already reaching out, beginning to learn to probe those intentions.

Maria Stabile showly moved to retrieve her deposition from under the cushion. She tore it up. She watched herself from a distance. There was a numbness she dully felt grateful for because it blocked a guilt. To tear up a deposition — even an unfinished one of her own and one that she had meant for her own eyes only as a way of getting her thoughts straight — was to tear the fabric of her conscience.

It seemed a near sacrilege to tear up a deposition — no matter that it was full of typing errors; the stenotype keyboard is completely different from the typewriter, and increasing skill at the stenotype had tended to make her a poor typist.

But by tearing it up she was no longer a court reporter. She was no longer even an ordinary human. She was something else. Just what she was and would become — and whether increasing skill at it would make her a poor human — she would have to learn.



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The Hall of The Mountain King

by JEFFREY BULLOCK

The thing he enjoyed more than anything, except of course actually capturing his butterflies, was to lie in bed at night and look at the cream of his collection on his bedroom wall and listen to Grieg's "Hall of the Mountain King" crackling on the phonograph.

It was a snap for him to imagine he was a dark, somber lord of a wind-scorched mountain pass, who stood, each day, spread-legged in a heavy fur and iron-mail coat, allowing nothing and nobody to pass without some payment of tribute. Long ago he had imagined that a silken prince in green and gold from a distant land had passed into his high realm with his beautiful daughters, each dressed in a fiery blaze of satin, sequins, and sashes. Not being willing to part with gold or jewels, the stone-hearted prince instead offered to part with one of his lovely daughters each time he found it necessary to use the mountain pass. This he did with *some* sorrow — for they were his daughters — so it was agreed that each daughter would be given a position in the lord's palace befitting her charm: at the foot of his bed, hung on the wall. The daughters of the prince were, of course, his butterflies.

He smiled every night at his silly fantasy. He fell asleep thinking about the flower fields in the nearby foothills where he daily added to his collection. His name was just Pietro and his age 52. His occupation was collecting disability compensation for an old back injury.

Up with the sun, he breakfasted, then whistled in and out of his small kitchen, gathering equipment

and putting it gently into a wicker picnic basket on the kitchen table. Spare netting, his killing jar, tweezers, rubbing alcohol, an empty cigar box, and his lunch went into the basket. His lunch was always the same: three sandwiches of white bread thickly spread with honeybutter, a pickle, and a can of pop. He especially liked honeybutter. It was a private harmless addiction — he loved it — and it also had an ironic association that he enjoyed. Nectar to feed the hunter of the nectar hunters. He thought of himself as a king butterfly in that regard. "Sweets for the sweet," he thought nonsensically.

It was mid-June, the morning was warm, and Pietro took to the fields in shirtsleeves with his long-handled, wide-mouth net of blue, infinitely light material cocked over his shoulder.

A short walk along a dirt road, over a stone wall, and a mile along the left bank of a shady river, and he was there; acres and acres of blue, white, yellow, and pink flowers gradually sloped away until they touched the base of the mountains. There were some bushes too, spread all around, and they were covered with flowers. The scene was a cacophony of insect chirps, hums, buzzes, and low, almost inaudible, rustlings. A city of bugs. A kingdom of bugs. The most exquisite flapped silently on tissue wings, jouncing erratically from blossom to blossom, bush to bush, bush to ground, air to air. Pietro hugged his net and marched overland, the collector, the colossus.

He did not capture just any butterflies. His collection was large, very large; so he was extra particular about what he swung his net at. For the common butterflies — the cabbages, the yellow sulphurs, the brimstones — he exercised his swing only for the practice.

After three hours of collecting a small group of extra-large but very mundane, ubiquitous tiger swallowtails (he sent them out at Christmas), he dropped beside a lilac bush and took to observing butterflies close up, setting aside his net and basket and rolling up his shirtsleeves. Everything about watching butterflies suck gently in the mouths of flowers was inspiring — how the eye and swirl and sawtooth-patterned wings opened and shut prayerfully, how the small beauties fluttered shyly, coyly, before settling down on a chosen blossom.

The only thing he didn't care for was watching the legs move. To him, the legs of a butterfly were no different than those of any other insect. They all were disgustingly segmented, bending at awkward angles, and clutching. Once, a butterfly which had recently emerged from a cocoon had taken to the

air prematurely, and since Pietro had been sitting and watching the emergence immediately nearby, it was not the insect's fault that a human arm was the closest place to set down. It clutched at his skin when it landed. Pietro had frozen with the butterfly opening and closing its wings. He separated enough of himself from cold panic to fumble behind himself for a magazine about insect collecting. He used it to dislodge the butterfly from his forearm and smash it to green pulp on the grass.

So he tried to ignore the legs and concentrate on the proboscis, which, while not terribly aesthetic in its serpentine winding and unwinding, was intriguing as a piece of technical apparatus. Through it flowed the nectar, from the bowels of the flower, drawn up into the body of the butterfly. It looked like a tiny vacuum hose, coiled neatly under the head when not in use, rolled out at full length when needed.

It was high noon and hot like an open furnace. Pietro carefully grabbed by the wings the butterfly he had been watching — an unusual black cloud sulphur that he had grown fond of. He went through step 1, step 2, and step 3 with the killing jar and afterwards put the insect in his cigar box. Before he shut it away, he unrolled the proboscis with a probing needle and watched it re-coil sluggishly, now as useless in its purpose as though it were a tiny roll of black thread.

He found a shady spot, under a tree very near to a ravine which led away into the mountains, and set upon two of his honeybutter sandwiches with deliberation. He always saved one for later, after his appetite had been piqued again by the afternoon chase. He crunched his pickle down and sipped his soda through a straw until the sweet beverage gurgled empty in the bottom of the can.

When the weather was good, as it was today, he would lie on his back on the cushion of grass and daydream for a while. Today he was listening to the prince (who *always* wore green and gold, with small silver bells hanging from the hem of his robe) complain that if he gave up his next daughter he would have none left. Well, Pietro thought, no dark lord worth his royal right to reside in the hall of the mountain would excuse a transgressor from paying his due .... And on it went, until he ended his reverie with the ceremonial placing of an imaginary butterfly of the most extreme beauty into his cigar box. Then he got to his feet, stretched, and listened fretfully to his bad back grind and snarl.

Need to get walking, he thought.

Ahead was the ravine which ran in an easy slope up into the mountains. He had once walked along it for a half mile and had seen ground higher above on a level jut, lying between two mountains plainly visible from his kitchen window. There was wild hibiscus there, and he had thought the chances excellent that black swallowtails and maybe a few even larger butterflies could be netted on their blossoms. If there were dark, shaded recesses or small caves in the rock walls, he might even find some of the very pretty large moths that sometimes came close to his kitchen window at night, but never, to his disappointment, landed or even flew close to the ground. He often would see their shadows, though, drifting across the ground when the moon was full.

So he tumbled and slid into the ravine. It was wide at the bottom, and so he began walking along it easily with his net propped on his shoulder, making him look a bit like Ahab with a ready harpoon. There were butterflies even in the ravine, shooting away from scrawny, flowerless bushes like Chinese rockets as he passed.

Chasing specimens while he was climbing along the ravine, no matter how gentle the ascent, was out of the question, he decided. So unless something irresistible happened to flutter his way, he would content himself with watching and making mental notes about different species and which ravine flowers they frequented. There weren't many flowers in the ravine, for that matter, and so he was surprised by the number of butterflies that were moving down the ravine toward him. He guessed, with a tremble, that somewhere above was a fine field of wild flowers.

After an hour of on and upward, of jockeying around briers and over boulders, the ravine opened onto a narrow apron of field in front of very high cliffs. As he had guessed, there were flowers — the field was choked with more kinds of flowers heaped in one place than he had ever seen or thought possible. If the field below had been the world of butterflies, he thought, this was surely the heaven. With a sweep of the eye, he saw swallowtails larger than any he had ever seen and species he had always considered to be far outside of his geographical area. There were purple butterflies he didn't even recognize.

The first specimen to go into his kill jar barely fit. It was so large that he feared the twisted wings — which were lavender — would be damaged. So he gingerly pulled the drugged insect out, gripping the clasped wings between a thumb and forefinger. When he reached

into the basket for a probing needle with which to pin the butterfly to the top of his basket until it would be still, it struggled with a breathless lurch and dropped onto his upper left leg, where it sat upright, motionless. It clutched him with its many legs.

Pietro crushed it quickly, without panic, with the cigar box.

That had been unfortunate, he thought, for it had taken him many years of collecting to find a butterfly so beautiful — so lavender — or so large as the one he had just destroyed. He had been in the marvelous high field for a half-hour, and that single specimen had used up the entire thirty minutes. He had stalked it, chased it, swung at it and missed time and again, until it tired and settled on a rock where he had swooped his net over it with his own remaining energy.

He would, he demanded of himself, catch another before starting for home.

To get the vigor for the chase back into his blood, he took the last honeybutter sandwich from the basket and swallowed it down in three bites. He hadn't quite gotten to his feet when a flash of lavender caught his eye, fluttering in various shades as wings flapped, carrying the insect easily along the base of the cliffs on the far edge of the field. He caught his breath in his mouth when he computed that at the distance he was standing from the butterfly, the creature — yes, that was the right word, he thought — was the size to his eye as if it were only a few yards away. It was the biggest butterfly in existence, surely, he decided, and it would undoubtedly bear his own name in a museum case, if he could catch it. On the run, he amusingly wished he had brought along a fishing net.

It was indeed an enormous butterfly. As he trailed after it at a slow run, he gaped wonder-struck whenever it flapped through the top of a lilac bush and knocked flowers back and forth in confusion with turbulence from its wings. And the wings, he noted with interest, were not just lavender. There was silver there also, a sheen on top of the lavender that glistened like sequins when the light was right.

Before he could get close enough for a good swing of the net and a quick capture, the butterfly veered to the left and disappeared, seemingly into the solid rock wall of the cliffs. Pietro's heart thumped in his mouth as he ran his tongue over his lower lip, which tasted of honeybutter. He threw his net from one hand into the other, like big game hunters in the movies do with their rifles, and ran to where his prey had vanished.

There the butterfly was, moving

upward into a wide gash in the rock wall, fluttering slowly several feet above a steep talus of boulders and loose gravel. To his endless relief, Pietro saw that the fissure was closed at the top and back by a massive sheet of the mountain. If the butterfly reemerged at the roof of the fissure, it would likely flutter back to the ground. And if it stayed in the fissure, it would land.

He started to climb, inhaling wildly for his second wind.

He moved along the rugged ascent with his feet and one hand only, for his net was in the other hand and he kept his eyes on the butterfly. At the instant he was considering sitting down and waiting to see what the insect would do, he was surprised by an airy rushing just above his head and a great shadow that moved away from him. He glanced up and there was *another* of the lavender butterflies. This one — larger than the other — was turning in a lazy circle about five feet above him, drifting like some runaway oriental kite on a pillow of warm air. He would have one of the two certainly, he thought, and if not, then another. Because where there are two, there are probably three. With that in mind he made a reckless slash with the net at the one above his head and missed. He had swung so hard, though, that his balance was upset, and he slid awkwardly off an irregular boulder and fell heavily onto his back. When he tried to move, he nearly lost consciousness from pain that echoed up and down his body and nausea that made his head spin. He discovered soon enough that he couldn't move.

On his back, he closed and opened his eyelids to clear away the tearful film that was beginning to form. The butterfly which he had chased into the fissure was now perched on a rock not far in front of him, folding and unfolding its wings. He cleared his head by shaking it and reassured himself that he was still thinking clearly by stating his name, when he was born, and his age, 52. Since he couldn't move his legs or turn his head, he knew his spine was badly damaged. High above him the second lavender butterfly was still turning around and around, shaking with an occasional flutter of wings. Then he noticed a *third* giant lavender butterfly, much higher than the other. "Where there's two, there's three, and when there's three, there's four," he thought.

He lay still through no choice of his own for fifteen minutes and watched more lavender butterflies appear. Then in a wide, slow-turning wheel, a dozen or more of them began an almost imperceptible descent toward him, silently beating their tissue wings. He could still

move his left arm, he discovered. The mountain king must have his tribute, he thought. So he used his good arm to reach for his net which was, however, just beyond his farthest stretch.

Behind his closed eyes he tried to see the prince in green and gold and the beautiful daughters still to be paid over, but that was not what was there. A butterfly was there — one of ordinary size, on a flower, with its proboscis plunged deep into the mouth of the flower, draining it of nectar. One of ordinary size ....

He contemplated the proboscises of the lavender giants soaring down from above him and pictured loosely coiled measuring tapes. He licked his lips one more time and still tasted honeybutter; then he slipped into blackness.

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We think it was Truman Capote who once said, of a colleague's work, "That's not writing; it's typewriting." A possibility which is taken up in this new Richard Frede story.

Letter to the Editor

by RICHARD FREDE

Mr. Robert Humus
Green House Publishers, Inc.
New York, New York

Dear Bob,

Thanks for your long and very flattering letter about my piece in *Prestige*. No, I can't tell you yet whether it's part of a new novel or not. I just don't know. I hope to explain why I don't know herewith.

God! I can't tell you how good it feels to finally be writing this letter.

It feels so good, I have just mixed myself a drink and I shall celebrate as I write.

It seems only yesterday (though it's exactly fifteen years this month) that I was a simple and callow, freshly minted college graduate, a naive English major steeped in Melville and the theory and practice of fiction, with nothing between myself and work or graduate school expect the ms. of yet another novel of college life from the undergraduate's point of view, *And the Wind Blows Cold*. I remember, poignantly, the long hesitation before you and Green House finally decided to publish it. I remember, painfully, the loud silence with which it was greeted.

But, oh, happy days! For, Bob, I truly *wrote* that book.

I remember, after publication, two years of starting numerous books and finishing none. And then that crazy Mexican producer decided it was time for yet another movie about college life which showed the decay under the ivy, the coed under the Chairman of the Department of Mental Health.

And so finally I had enough money to leave my parents' apartment on East 93rd Street and break free and get myself an apartment of my own on East 90th Street. Halcyon days! Repainting the apartment myself, acquiring an airline stewardess as a mistress,

and buying things.

I bought all sorts of things. Posters from the Marlboro book stores, furniture from the Door Store, a leather shaving kit with my initials on it from Saks, a corduroy jacket from Brooks Bros., a hi-fi stereo set with wind tunnels for speakers from Lafayette, a used Hasselblad from Willoughby's, a designer-designed bar from a designer, and, God help me (for, up till now, I have been unable to help myself), a used electric typewriter from Omega Office Supplies.

Bob, I want to stop right here and now and point out to you that this letter is being written on a hand-driven typewriter. The very same one on which I wrote *And the Wind Blows Cold* in English 119, Theory and Practice of, etc. My parents gave it to me when I graduated from high school and none of us have ever regretted it. Which is to say, they've always been so proud of me and my writing, and when I got the National Book Award for both Fiction and Belles Lettres the same year!

I'm so ashamed.

Anyway, for a year after getting the electric typewriter, I worked very industriously again starting and not finishing a number of different novels. You will remember the many lunches you and Green House stood me to while we discussed my *new* novel (as in contrast to the new novel of two weeks previous). You will remember my many martini-inspired lectures on the theory and practice of. You will remember all the new contracts we wrote that year. You (and Green House especially) will remember your expense account of that year. And you will, no doubt, remember your own kind despondency when you realized after three years of our knowing each other that the only thing I ever wrote that I ever finished was a new contract.

And then your elation, your positive *elation*, when, suddenly, in the fourth year of our author-editor relationship, the finished manuscripts began to flow from me, as if, as you said, in a beautiful analogy, "a damn had burst, spilling forth a torrent of words, all of them salable."

And, of course, they were. All bestsellers. All critically successful as well. NBA, Pulitzers, even an early nomination for the Nobel, which I hadn't expected to get for at least another twenty years. (You will remember that I retained my humility — as well I should have done.) Adaptation into plays, movies. Broadway. Hollywood. Subsidiary rights. A marriage. A divorce. Headlines. The *Tonight* Show. Starlets and scandal. Furious sex life, not even time enough to get married again, so fast was the pace. The Jet Set, the In-Crowd. And,

yet, I was not happy.

I remember, when the first few manuscripts crossed your desk in such quick succession and with such profound range of subject and style, that, at a party, you cozied up to me and insinuated that the explanation for it all was that I had at last taken your advice and gone to a shrink for deep analysis. Your exact words were, "You must be going five days a week. Where do you find the time to write?"

And I just grinned. It was either that or clout you a good one on the nose. For I needed no time at all to write.

What had happened was, one morning about a year after I'd bought the electric typewriter, I sat down at my desk to start another novel. *And the Well Runs Dry*, I think it was going to be called, and it was based on a dream I'd had the night before.

I put some paper in the machine and turned it on. BAM! The carriage slammed itself over and the keys began to type like crazy. I remember being furious. I'd been having trouble with it, and a repairman had had to come by twice already at twelve dollars an hour to fix it. He had assured me that I'd have no more trouble.

I was about to turn the damn thing off and reach for the phone when I noticed that what the damn thing was typing made sense. And it kept on making sense. At the end of the page I turned it off and put in a new piece of paper. It was fascinating. As soon as I turned it on again, it kept right on going and right on making sense. Of course, there were a few spelling and typing errors, but after a few pages, I realized that what it was writing was a pretty good beginning for a pretty good novel.

So, I just sat there all day turning it off and on and feeding it paper and just let it keep going. I figured the law of probabilities (like the thousand monkeys sitting at a thousand typewriters ultimately reproducing every book that had ever been written) could account for the performance. And I also figured that whatever had gone kerflooey with the machine would go further kerflooey after a while and the machine would stop making sense or even writing words.

In the meantime, it was writing a pretty good book. You'll remember it, *The Gold and the Dross*. I had the manuscript on your desk two weeks later. All it took on my part was a little editing and polishing, a little sharpening of dialogue here and there, a few cuts (the machine has a tendency to overwrite and to remake points it has already made), and some correction of spelling, punctuation, and grammar. The machine itself came up with the title about halfway through

in that in-bed dialogue between the sand blaster and the Sutton Place girl.

Well, you'd think after that, since the machine kept right on writing whenever I turned it on, that all I had to do was sit back and count the manuscripts. And that's about all I did for the next few years. But then, a couple of years ago, I began to feel uneasy. Things were *too* easy.

What I'd eventually done was, rigged up a setup whereby the typewriter was fed from a continuous roll of paper. All I had to do, just as I did this morning and as I've done every morning since, is go into its room and turn it on. After eight hours, I turn it off — I wouldn't expect any writer to be able to do good work for more than eight hours at a stretch. Then I put the typescript aside in the refrigerator (where, I figure, it will be as safe as anywhere from fire) and, when I feel like it, edit, polish, etc. That continuous roll, by the way, accounts for the increased production the last two years — the refrigerator accounts for the occasional food stains and the manuscripts smelling like salami.

Even when it's turned on, it doesn't write all the time, of course. Sometimes it just sits there and hums and lets the current flow through it. The first time this happened, I panicked. I thought it was busted, the magic gone. Now I think it's just thinking.

As I say, though, things had gotten too easy. And I was beginning to long to write something myself, perhaps under a nom de plume. It's okay to live well and make lots of money without trying and be beloved of readers and critics alike, but a man, especially a writer, needs some sort of self-expression.

So, two years ago, I started on a novel of my own. The one we keep talking about at lunches that I keep saying I'm working on even though I continue to finish other books while I work on it. It. My masterpiece. *My* book.

But the work hasn't been going so well. In the past two years I have produced only a little over sixty pages which satisfy me, while the electric typewriter has produced a bestselling, prize-winning novel (which it is now working on the screen adaptation of — which will no doubt win it an Oscar), several stories (including the one in *Prestige* which you just wrote me about, some mediocre poetry (which yet still managed to find publication), and an article entitled "Biological Time Clocks and Hibernation as Relevant to Man in Space" which was published in *The National Science Review* and subsequently reprinted by NASA.

How it ever got to be an

authority in this area (I hadn't even known there *was* such an area) is quite beyond me. Certainly the research materials aren't available in this house. But there it is. It *is* an authority in this area, and that makes *me* an authority in the area, and I'm stuck with it. The weight of the responsibility is unbearable. I get a call from NASA or someone connected with NASA at least once a week, and I've been told that my refusal to work with the other experts in the area may be slowing our space program by years. Even the FBI has called on me once, and I can't even tell them the nature of the research I'm involved in now. *It* hasn't told me.

That's another reason for this letter. They're beginning to think that I'm not just un-cooperative, but that I might be un-American as well. Before I find myself up before a congressional committee, I want to get a *written* statement, a full confession as it were, to someone who will later be able to vouch for my integrity.

Now, Bob, I am going to do the only honorable thing left to me. I am going to go into its room and kill the electric typewriter. Even as I write you this, I can hear it typing away.

Bob — I have just returned from the other room. The electric typewriter had just written, "Even as I write you this, I can hear it typing away."

And *it* had stopped typing before I had.

So I couldn't find the courage to do anything to it, not turn it off, not unplug it, not take away its roll of paper, not anything.

It's either *it* or me, and since *it* is by far the more productive contributor to society, I am now going to do the only *other* honorable thing I can do.

Good-by, and thanks for everything. It's new manuscript is in the refrigerator.

THE SONS OF MARS REVISITED

I dined at a very pleasant French restaurant last night and, at the conclusion, when the maitre d' arrived to express his hope that we had had a pleasant meal, our hostess assured him we had indeed and said, "Do you know who our guest is?"

Then she turned to me and said, "Do you mind?"

Of course I minded. It's not that I object to the notoriety, but too many of those who, for one reason or another, are enthusiastic about my writing, overestimate my status. They seem to think I'm a household word, and I'm not.

It's my experience that a very large majority of Americans, and a fairly substantial majority of even intelligent Americans, have never heard of me, and, after my importance has been explained to them, prefer to continue not hearing of me.

I suspected, therefore, that my hostess would be embarrassed and that I would be made uncomfortable. It was too late to stop her, however, so I nodded my resigned permission.

My hostess said enthusiastically, "Our guest is the famous writer, Isaac Asimov."

ISAAC ASIMOV

Science

The maitre d', schooled to every politeness, smiled very patiently, and said, "I am pleased to meet you." It was, however, quite obvious to me that he hadn't heard of me, that he didn't care that he hadn't, and that he wasn't particularly pleased to meet me.

What saved the situation was that ten feet away stood the pretty waitress who had been dancing attendance on all our wants for two hours, and with whom I had been exchanging badinage (as is my wont). At the mention of my name, she suddenly gasped.

To ignore the maitre d' was, for me, the work of a moment; to smile broadly at the pretty waitress and say, "Have you read my books?" was the work of another.

"Oh, yes," she said, "but I never thought you really existed. I thought you were at least five men."

"The usual reaction of women, my dear," I said, suavely, and the whole evening ended on a high point.

So watch out for the unexpected side-effects, as in the case of Mariner 9—

On May 30, 1971, Mariner 9 was launched. The intention was to have it move into orbit around Mars and photograph its entire surface. There had been some thought of having it also photograph the two Martian satellites, but whoever decided on priorities insisted that the probe was to concentrate on Mars only. The scientists in charge, however, arranged a certain flexibility that would allow some study of the satellites if the possibility turned up.

The possibility did indeed turn up. When Mariner 9 arrived at Mars, it found a major planetary dust storm had shrouded the planet in an impenetrable cloud, and there was nothing for Mariner 9 to do but circle the planet and twiddle its thumbs. Rather than waste its time altogether, it was ordered to take a look at the satellites, and this unexpected side-effect of the dust storm produced excellent results.

Later probes, Viking 1 and Viking 2, also studied the satellites, so that we know infinitely more about them now than we did a decade ago.

We did know something about them, of course, from the moment they were discovered by the American astronomer, Asaph Hall, in 1877. He named them, very appropriately, Phobos ("fear") and Deimos ("terror") after the sons of Mars (or, more correctly, Ares) in the Greek myths.

The distance of these satellites from the planet and their period of revolution were worked out at once, and I wrote about this and how one

could deduce from it the appearance of the satellites in the Martian sky in my article KALEIDOSCOPE IN THE SKY (F & SF, August 1967).

What we still didn't know at that time was the exact size of the satellites. For that we had to wait for the Mars-probes, and it is to discuss this that I now revisit the sons of Mars.

From the very start it was certain that the Martian satellites were very small. Even when they were at their closest, only 56,000,000 kilometers (35,000,000 miles) away, they remained very dim.

Satellites such as Ganymede and Titan were brighter than Phobos or Deimos even though the former pair were much farther away. Though Triton, the satellite of Neptune, is never closer to us than 4,350,000,000 kilometers (2,700,000,000 miles), which is 75 times as far from us as are Phobos or Deimos at their closest, that distant satellite is nevertheless almost as bright as Phobos or Deimos. This, despite the fact that Triton is lit only by what is, with reference to itself, a very dim and distant Sun.

From this alone we know that the Martian satellites must excessively tiny. Why else should it have taken so long to discover them?

But how tiny is tiny? Astronomers couldn't tell. If the satellites would only show a visible disc that could be measured, then, from their known distance from us, their diameters could be worked out. They were too small to show a visible disc, however, even under the greatest magnification.

Failing that, an idea of the diameter could be obtained from the amount of light they caught from the Sun and reflected to us. We knew how far the satellites were from the Sun and from us, so given the amount of light we actually receive, we could calculate how much they receive per square kilometer of surface, if those square kilometers reflected every bit of light that fell on them.

However, any object reflects only a fraction of the light that falls on it (that fraction is its "albedo"), and we don't know what the albedo of the satellites is. If we knew the albedo, we would at once know the satellite size.

We could, of course, make some logical assumptions. For one thing, the Martian satellites are far too small and far too close to the Sun to have any trace of atmosphere or water. Their surfaces would have to be bare rock.

Our Moon's surface is bare rock, and that reflects very little light. Despite its apparent brightness, the Moon has an albedo of only 0.06; it

reflects only 1/16 of the light that falls on it.

In 1956, the Dutch-American astronomer, Gerard Peter Kuiper, assumed that Phobos and Deimos had the albedo of the Moon. Based on this assumption, he estimated that Phobos was about 12 kilometers (7.5 miles) in diameter and that Deimos was about 6 kilometers (3.75 miles) in diameter.

This was the best that could be done until 1969. In that year, the Mars-probe, Mariner 7, passed by Mars and took photographs of its surface as it passed. One of these photographs happened to be taken just as Phobos passed in front of the lens, and the satellite showed up as a black silhouette against Mars.

The study of that photograph showed that Phobos was unexpectedly dark. It reflected an even smaller fraction of the light that fell upon it than the Moon did. This meant that it would have to be somewhat larger than Kuiper had estimated it to be if it were to send us the light it does. The same was likely true of Deimos if it, too, had a lower albedo than the Moon had.

The second piece of information was that the silhouette of Phobos was not round, but oval.

This was not, actually, very surprising.

The Sun and Moon are round in outline when viewed from any vantage-point, but Earth and Mars, when viewed from above the equatorial plane appear slightly elliptical. Saturn and Jupiter, when viewed so, appeared pronoucedly elliptical.

These elliptical appearances are the result of rotation. If a heavenly body did not rotate, or rotated only very slowly, then, when viewed from a distance at any angle, it would appear round — provided it was large enough.

A large body, the size of the Moon or larger, produces a gravitational field intense enough to compact all its matter as close to the center as possible, and this automatically produces a sphere. The sphere may not be perfect, for there can be surface irregularities. These are very small compared to the total size of the world, so that if the Earth were reduced to the size of a billiard ball, it would be smoother than a billiard ball despite all its mountains and valleys.

As a body is considered with less and less mass, its gravitational field is less and less able to compact it, and the surface irregularities, though no larger in an absolute sense than those on larger worlds, become much larger when viewed as fractions of the total diameter. In that case, the

world has a sensibly irregular shape.

This was already known of the asteroid Eros, for instance. It is larger than Phobos and Deimos and delivers light that waxes and wanes regularly in intensity. The assumption is that, as it revolves, it presents cross-sections of different size. It could be roughly brick-shaped, for instance, and when we view it broad side on, we would receive more light from it than when we view it narrow side on.

Why, then, shouldn't Phobos and Deimos be irregularly-shaped as well?

They are. Mariner 9's photographs showed the satellites to be remarkably potato-shaped, right down to the "eyes" which were actually craters.

If you smoothed out, in imagination, the crater-irregularities of the two satellites, you found that the average shape was an asymmetric ellipsoid which had to be defined by three measurements.

For instance, of all the lines through the center of either satellite, one line, in stretching from surface to surface, would be the "longest diameter."

Suppose you draw the various lines through the center which are perpendicular to the longest diameters. Of these, one is shortest and is the "shortest diameter." The diameter which is at right angles to both the longest and shortest diameters is the "intermediate diameter."

For Phobos, the longest diameter is 28 kilometers (17 miles), the intermediate diameter is 23 kilometers (14 miles) and the shortest diameter is 20 kilometers (12 miles). Even the shortest diameter is distinctly larger than Kuiper's estimate of the average diameter of Phobos.

For Deimos, the longest diameter is 16 kilometers (10 miles), the intermediate diameter is 12 kilometers (7.5 miles) and the shortest diameter is 10 kilometers (6 miles). Again, this is distinctly larger than the Kuiper estimate.

Even so, these are small worlds. If you imagine Phobos placed on New York City in such a way as to cover as much ground as possible, it would cover the boroughs of Brooklyn and Queens. Deimos, placed similarly, would cover the borough of Brooklyn alone.

The satellites are not too small, however, to support a comfortable astronautical base in times to come.

The surface area of Phobos is 1,500 square kilometers (570 square miles) which is a little over half that of the state of Rhode Island. The

surface area of Deimos is 400 square kilometers (160 square miles) which is a little over half that of the city of New York.

As for volume, Phobos contains about 5,400 cubic kilometers (1,300 cubic miles) while Deimos contains 780 cubic kilometers (190 cubic miles). Phobos is thus about 7 times as voluminous as Deimos.

If our Moon were hollow, it would take over 4 million bodies the size of Phobos, tightly packed, to fill it. It would take 28 million bodies the size of Deimos to do the same job.

The best estimates at the moment are that Phobos and Deimos have densities of 2 grams per cubic centimeter (125 pounds per cubic foot). If so, then the mass of Phobos is 10,800,000 billion kilograms (12,000 billion tons) and of Deimos 1,500,000 billion kilograms (1,700 billion tons).

From the mass of the satellites and the diameters, we can calculate the value of the surface gravity as compared to that of Earth.

The average surface gravity on Phobos would be 0.0007 that of the Earth. It would be a little higher at the end of the shortest diameter, a little lower at the end of the longest diameter, but not enough to be noticeable to any astronaut using the satellites as bases.

A person weighing 70 kilograms (154 pounds) on Earth, would weigh about 50 grams (1.7 ounces) on Phobos. He would weigh half of that on Deimos.

Both Phobos and Deimos revolve about Mars in such a way as to show the same face to Mars at all times, just as the Moon always shows the same face to Earth as it revolves. Each of the Martian satellites turns so that one end of its longest diameter points always toward Mars. (The other end, naturally, points always away from Mars.)

This means that Phobos and Deimos each makes one turn relative to the stars as it moves once around Mars. The period of revolution of each is therefore also its "sidereal day" (where "sidereal" is from a Latin word meaning "star"). The sidereal day of Phobos is 7.65 hours and of Deimos 30.30 hours.

Each time Phobos or Deimos has moved once about Mars, however, it has followed Mars in the revolution of the latter about the Sun. This produces a small apparent motion of the Sun in the reverse direction, so that the Sun seems to complete its circuit of the sky, as seen from Phobos or Deimos, more slowly than the stars do.* (This is true on Earth also. The

See THE DANCE OF THE SUN. F&SF, April, 1968

Sun moves about our sky in 24 hours, but each star makes a complete circle in only 23 hours and 56 minutes.)

The period from sunrise to sunrise ("solar day") on Phobos is 0.0036 hours (20 seconds) longer than the period from star-rise to star-rise. The extra length is greater on Deimos, which takes a longer time to make its revolution, thus giving the Sun a longer time to drift backward. The period from sunrise to sunrise on Deimos is 0.056 hours (3.3 minutes) longer than the period from star-rise to star-rise.

Suppose, now, that you are standing on the end of the longest diameter of Phobos, the end facing away from Mars. That end would always face away from Mars, and you would never see the planet you were circling. On the other hand, you would see the stars wheeling about the sky from east to west, as you do on Earth, but moving a little over three times as quickly.

The Sun would also rise in the east and set in the west but wouldn't quite keep up with the stars. Each Sunrise would be 20 seconds later, relative to the stars, and the Sun would therefore lose one complete circuit of the sky in 687 days, which is the length of the Martian year.

If you are on the end of the longest diameter of Deimos, the end facing away from Mars, you would see the stars moving from east to west at a pace just a little slower than would be the case on Earth. Each Sunrise would be 3.3 minutes further behind the stars, but since Deimos makes fewer rotations in the course of the Martian year, this, too, would amount to a total lag of one day in the course of that Martian year.

The circumference of Phobos from one end of the longest diameter to the other and back is 79 kilometers (49 miles). For Deimos, the corresponding figure is 44 kilometers (27 miles). To walk the maximum circumference of Phobos, then, is like walking from New York City to Trenton, New Jersey. To walk around Deimos is like walking from Fort Worth, Texas to Dallas, Texas. To put it another way, any two points on Phobos's surface are separated by less than 40 kilometers (25 miles) and on Deimos by less than 22 kilometers (14 miles).

Given the circumference of the satellites and the length of the day, it appears that Phobos is turning, with respect to the stars, at a rate of 10.3 kilometers per hour (6.4 miles per hour) and Deimos at a rate of 1.5 kilometers per hour (0.9 miles per hour). The rate is very slightly slower with respect to the Sun.

This means that if we were to trot westward at a brisk, but not impossible, speed on Phobos, we could keep up with the turning sky. If the Sun were not in the sky, it would never rise for us as long as we managed to

keep running. Or, if it were overhead, it would never stop being overhead as long as we managed to keep running.

On Deimos, a leisurely stroll would do the same. In fact, if we walked briskly westward on Deimos, we would overtake the Sun and see it rise in the west.

And what about Mars as seen from the satellites? As long as we remain at the far end of the longest diameter (or near it) Mars is never in the sky. If, however, we begin at the far end and move away in any direction, without changing that direction, then in some 20 kilometers (12 miles) on Phobos, or 11 kilometers (6.8 miles) on Deimos, we will see Mars looming up above the horizon.

By the time we reach the opposite end of the longest diameter, the one facing Mars, then Mars will be directly overhead, and it will stay there as long as we remain on that point on the satellite.

In moving from the far end of the longest diameter to the near end, the appearance of Mars and its lifting above the horizon must be a beautiful and awe-inspiring sight.

Not only is Mars larger than our Moon, but it is much closer to its satellites than the Moon is to Earth. It bulks much larger, therefore, in the satellite sky than the Moon does in ours.

As seen from Deimos, Mars is a little over 30 times as wide as the Moon appears to us, and its apparent area is just about 1,000 times as great as the Moon's apparent area is to us.

As seen from Phobos, which is considerably nearer to Mars than Deimos is, Mars is 78 times as wide as the Moon appears to us and has 6,100 times the apparent ara.

Mars appears so huge as seen from Phobos, that four globes the size of Mars, placed side by side, would stretch nearly from horizon to horizon, while nine would encircle the sky.

Mars reflects a larger fraction of the light falling upon it than the Moon does, but Mars is farther from the Sun than the Moon is and gets less light per square kilometer for that reason. Taking all these factors into account, Mars, as seen from Deimos, is, at its brightest, 940 times as bright as the full Moon appears to us. Mars, as seen from Phobos, is, at its brightest, 5,700 times as bright as our full Moon.

It might be thought that if Mars is so much brighter in the satellite skies than the Moon is in ours, then Mars must really be the dominating body of those skies. So it is, in terms of sheer size, since the fact that it is so

much larger than the Moon means that it is so much larger than the Sun (as seen in our sky) as well. It is even larger if we compare it to the Sun as seen in the satellite sky, for out there the Sun is only 5/8 as wide as it appears to us and is only 2/5 as bright.

Even so, however, as seen from Deimos, the shrunken Sun is still 212 times as bright as Mars ever gets to be. And on Phobos, where Mars is so bloated, the Sun is nevertheless 35 times as bright as Mars ever gets to be.

What's more, when the Sun is in the satellite sky, Mars simply isn't at its brightest. Not only does the Sun's greater brightness wash it out, but with the Sun in the satellite sky, less than half of Mars's surface is illuminated.

As the Sun circles the sky, Mars goes through a series of phases just as the Moon does as seen from the Earth; it goes through a complete series of phases once each revolution of the satellites.

Suppose we are standing on Phobos at the end of the longest diameter, the end facing Mars. Mars is at zenith, huge and bright, but it is just about half-full, for it is sunrise and the Sun's light is coming from the east, so that the western half of Mars, as seen from Phobos, is dark.

As the Sun rises rapidly, the lighted portion of Mars shrinks and becomes an ever-narrowing crescent. One and a half hours after sunrise, the Sun reaches Mars, slips behind it and is eclipsed. Mars is now totally dark, for only its far side is lit by the Sun.

Well, not *totally* dark. The Sun illuminates the Martian atmosphere, and against the black of the sky, a luminous ring outlines the darkened body of the planet.

The Martian atmosphere contains the pink dust of Mars so that the outlining circle is a delicate pink and undoubtedly very beautiful.

It is not a symmetrical pink circle. When the Sun slips behind the eastern edge of Mars, the eastern rim of the atmosphere is illuminated more brightly than the western rim. As the Sun moves farther westward, however, the brightness of the eastern rim dims and that of the western rim brightens until, after 25 minutes, the circle of pink light is more or less evenly bright. Then, the western rim brightens further, while the eastern rim dims further until, after another 25 minutes, the Sun's flame bursts out from behind the western edge of Mars.

As the Sun sinks, Mars becomes an ever-thickening crescent of its western side. By sunset, which comes an hour and a half after the Sun has emerged from behind Mars, Mars is half-full again; its western half being lighted this time and its eastern half dark.

After the Sun sinks behind the western horizon, the lighted portion of Mars's globe expands further. Just under two hours after Sunset, the Sun is shining directly down on the other end of the longest diameter, so that its light slips past Phobos and onto the side of Mars facing the satellite. Mars is now at its full and brightest — all the more so because there is no Sun in the sky to compete.

But the western edge of Mars begins to darken at once, and Mars shrinks. In just under two more hours, it is in the half-phase and the Sun is rising again.

For Deimos, the cylce is much the same, but is slower. It takes four times as long for the Sun to go through each of these stages.

Mars, as seen from Deimos, is smaller than as seen from Phobos. The Sun, however, as it moves behind the smaller Mars, does so at a slower pace, so that it remains behind Mars for 82 minutes.

In KALEIDOSCOPE IN THE SKY, I described the size of the satellites as seen in the Martian sky, making use of Kuiper's estimate of their size. Let me, in this revisit, give better figures.

When Phobos is seen directly overhead by an observer standing on the Martian equator, it is then at its maximum apparent size. We see its longest diameter facing us, so that we see it with its intermediate diameter in some particular direction and the shortest diameter at right angles to that. Phobos would there appear as an oval body 13.3 by 11.2 minutes of arc. Even its widest diameter would be less than half that of the Moon as seen from Earth, and Phobos's total apparent area would at best be only 1/6 that of the Moon.

As for Deimos, it would appear only as a fat star, 2.0 by 1.6 minutes of arc, with an area less than 1/300 of the Moon.

Phobos would never seem more than 1/16 as bright as the full Moon in our sky, since it is bathed in weaker sunlight and has a lower albedo than the Moon. Deimos would never be more than 1/1000 as bright as the full Moon in our sky.

Nevertheless, the three brightest objects in Mars's sky would be the Sun, Phobos, and Deimos, in that order. Fourth would be (at its brightest) Earth!

But there is more to say about the sons of Mars — next month.

Here is the exclusive story behind the alien visitors known as Cobae. Mr. Effinger's welcome new story turns out to be totally entertaining and convincing science fiction story about basketball!

From Downtown At The Buzzer

by GEORGE ALEC EFFINGER

There are a couple of things my mother will never get to experience.

I mean, there are more than a couple, of course, but there are two things that I think of immediately. First off, my mother won't ever know what it's like to see twelve space creatures in blue suits and masks staring at you while you eat breakfast and wash walls and go to the bathroom. That I know. That I can talk about. My mother can't, and just as well, I guess. But believe me, I can.

The other thing is, my mother will never, *ever* know the incredible joy you get, this feeling of complete, instant gratification, when you jump into the air, twist around, and send a basketball in an absolutely perfect arc into the net maybe twenty-three feet away. You have somebody from the other team leaping up with you, his hand right in your face, but sometimes you have God on your side, and nothing in the universe can keep that ball from going through that hoop. You know it sometimes, you can feel it even before you let go of the ball, while you're still floating. Then it's just the smallest flick of the wrist, your fingertips just brushing the ball away, perfect, perfect, perfect, you don't even have to look. You land on the hardwood floor with this terrific smile on your face, and the guy who had his hands up to block you is muttering to himself, and you're talking to yourself, too, as you run down-court on defense. You're happy. My mother will never know that kind of happy.

Not that I do, either, very often.

Now, this here magazine is paying me a lot of money for this exclusive story. So I figure I have to give them what they paid for. But other magazines have paid others for their exclusive stories, and they might tell stories a lot different than mine. That's because no one

else in the security installation knew the Cobae as well as I did.

I'll start about a year ago, about a month before I saw my first Coba. I was a captain then, attached to Major James McNeill. Major McNeill was the commanding officer of the entire compound, and because of that I was given access to a lot of things that I really shouldn't have seen. But I saw those things, and I read the major's reports, and, well, I guess that I can put two and two together as well as anybody. So, from all of that, there wasn't much happening around the compound that I didn't know about.

The installation was in the middle of an awful lot of nothing, in one of the small parishes of southwestern Louisiana. St. Didier Parish. There was one town kind of large, Linhart, maybe six thousand people, three movie theaters, a lot of bars. That was it for the whole parish, just about. South of us were towns of Cajuns who trapped muskrat and nutria, or worked in the cane fields, or worked in the rice fields or on shrimp boats, or netted crabs. They spoke a kind of strange mixture of English and a French no Parisian had ever heard. All around us, and further north, there were only farms. We were tucked away in an isolated part of the parish, with only a small dirt road leading to the one main north-south route. No one on the base had anything to do with the Cajuns; come furlough time or weekend passes, it made more sense to go to New Orleans, an hour and a half, maybe two hours east of us.

We didn't have a lot to look at, except fields on the other side of the wire fence. It was summer ten months of the year. The base was landscaped with a large variety of local plants, some of which I don't even know the names of. Everything flowered, and there was something blooming almost every month of the year. It was kind of nice. I liked the job.

I liked it a lot, until the Cobae showed up.

Before that, though, I wasn't exactly sure why we were there. We were a top-security installation, doing just about nothing. I was kept busy enough with day-to-day maintenance and routines. I had been transferred down from Dayton, Ohio, and it never occurred to me to ask Major McNeill what the hell we were supposed to be doing, surrounded by a lot of yam fields, between the marshes on the west and the swamps on the east. I mean, it just never came up. I had learned a long time ago that if I just did what I was told to do, and did it right, then everything, absolutely everything, would be fine. That kind of life was very pleasant and satisfying. Everything was laid out for me, and I just took it all in

order, doing task one, doing task two, doing task three. The day ended, I had free time, at regular intervals I was paid. The base had plenty of leisure facilities. It was all just great by me.

Of course, I was a captain.

My main outlet during my leisure was playing basketball. There were very good gym facilities on the base, and I've always been the competitive type, at least in situations where winning and losing didn't have much of a permanent effect on my life. I enjoy target shooting, because there is no element of luck involved. It's just you, the rifle, and the target. But if you put me down in a hot spot, with people shooting back, I don't believe I would have quite the same relish.

Forget it. There were always a few other people on the base, not always male, who liked to get into the pick-up games. Sometimes someone would show up, someone I hadn't seen on the court for weeks. Mostly, however, there were the same regulars. Tuesday and Thursday evenings, those were the big basketball games. Those were the games that even I couldn't get into, on occasion. They were what you'd call blood games. I enjoyed watching them almost as much as I liked playing in them. Maybe I should have been watching a little closer.

All right, it was the middle of August, and the temperature outside was in the middle nineties, all the time. Every day. *All* the time. And the humidity matched the temperature, figure for figure. So we just stayed in the air-conditioned buildings and sent the enlisted men outside to take care of running errands. It takes a while to get adjusted, you see, from mild Ohio weather to high summer in subtropical Louisiana. I wasn't altogether adjusted to it. I liked my office, and I liked my air-conditioned car, and I liked my air-conditioned quarters. But there were little bits of not-air-conditioned in among those things that got to me and made me struggle to breathe. I don't think I could hack it as an African explorer, if they still have them, or as a visitor to other equatorial places, where the only comforts are a hand-held fan and an occasional cool drink.

Terrific. You've got the background. That's the way things were and, like I say, I was all in favor of them just going on like that until I felt like dying or something. But things didn't go on like that.

At the end of August a general showed up, trailing two colonels. They were in one long black car. In three long black cars behind the brass were the Cobae. I think it would be a good idea if I kind of went into detail about the Cobae and how we happened to get them

dumped in our laps.

As I learned shortly after their arrival, the Cobae had appeared on Earth sometime in July. I forget the exact date. They were very cautious. Apparently, they had remained in their ship in space, monitoring things, picking and choosing, making their inscrutable minds up about God only knows what. A paper that crossed Major McNeill's desk, a paper that I shouldn't have seen, said that one Coba appeared in the private quarters of the President. How he got there is still a mystery. An awful lot about the Cobae is still a mystery. Anyway, I suppose the President and his wife were a little startled. Ha. Sometimes on lonely nights I like to imagine that scene. Depending on my mood, the scene can be very comic or very dramatic. Depending on my mood, and what the President and his wife were doing, and how genuinely diplomatic and resilient the President was.

After all, remember that the President is just a guy, too, and he's probably not crazy about strangers materializing in his bedroom. He's probably even less crazy about short, squat, really ugly creatures in his bedroom. Picture the scene yourself. Take a few seconds, I'll wait. See?

Well, the President called for whomever he usually calls for, and there was a very frantic meeting, in which nothing intelligent at all was said. There weren't contingency plans for this sort of thing. It's not often that the President of the United States has to wing it in a crisis situation. And this was a crisis situation, even though the Coba hadn't said a word, moved a muscle, or even blinked, so far as anyone could determine.

Okay, picture everyone dressed and formal and a little calmed down now, thanks to things like Valium and Librium and Elavil and Jack Daniels. Now we have a President and his advisors. *They* have a creature in a blue, shiny uniform and a mask over his face. It wasn't exactly a helmet. It covered what we call the Coba's nose and mouth, by liberal interpretation. There was a flexible hose from the mask to a small box on the chest. The President doesn't have the faintest idea what to do. Neither does the Secretary of State, who gets the job tossed to him, because it seems like his department. The potato gets tossed back and around for a while. The Coba still hasn't done a doggone thing. As a matter of fact, no one yet has gotten around to addressing the creature. (I think I will stop calling them creatures.)

Fifteen minutes after our world's first contact with intelligent life beyond our world, someone has the bright idea to call a scientist in.

"Who?" asked the President.

"I don't know," said the Secretary of State.

"What kind of scientist?" asked one of the advisors. "An astronomer? An ethnologist? A linguist? A sociologist? An anthropologist?"

"Call 'em all," said the President, with the kind of quick thinking that has endeared him to some of us.

"Call who all?" asked the advisor.

The President, by this time, was getting a little edgy. He was ready to start raising his voice, a sure sign that he was frustrated and angry. Before that, however, he chose to ask one final, well-modulated question. "There must be one person out of the millions of people in this damn country to call," he said. "Someone best suited to handling this. Who is it?"

There was only silence.

After a while, as the President's face turned a little redder, one of the advisors coughed a little and spoke up. "Uh," he said, "why don't we hide this joker away somewhere. You know, somewhere really secure. Then we assemble a reasonable team of specialists, and they can go on from there. How's that?"

"Wonderful," said the President, with the kind of irony that has endeared him to a few of us. "What do you think the joker will do when we try to hide him away?"

"Ask him," said the Secretary of State.

Again, there was silence. This time, though, everyone looked toward the President. It was a leader of the country meeting an important emissary kind of thing. So it was his potato, after all. You can bet he didn't like it.

Finally, the President said, "He speaks English?" No one replied. After a while, the Secretary of State spoke up again.

"Ask him," said the S. of S.

"An historic occasion," murmured the President. He faced the Coba. He took a closer look and shuddered. That was the reaction we all had until we got used to their appearance. After all, the President is just a guy, too. But a well-trained guy.

"Do you speak English?" asked the President.

"Yes," said the Coba. That brought another round of silence.

After a time, the Secretary of State said, "You've heard this discussion, then. Have you understood it?"

"Yes," said the Coba.

"Would you object to the plan, then?" asked the secretary. "Would you agree to being questioned by a team of our scientists, in a confidential manner?"

"No," said the Coba, in answer to the secretary's first question, and "Yes," to the secretary's second.

The President took a deep breath. "Thank you," he said. "You can understand our perplexity here and our need for discretion in the whole matter. May I ask where you are from?"

"Yes," said the Coba.

Silence.

"Where are you from?" asked the Secretary of State.

Silence.

"Are you from our, uh, what you call, our solar system?" asked the President.

"No," said the Coba.

"From some other star, then?" asked the emboldened advisor.

"Yes," said the Coba.

"Which star?" asked the advisor.

Silence.

It was several minutes later that the assembled group began to realize that the Coba was only going to answer yes-no questions. "Great," said the President. "It'll only take years to get any information that way."

"Don't worry," said an advisor. "If we pick the right people, they'll have the right questions."

"Pick them, then," said the President.

"We'll get to work on it," said another advisor.

"Right now," said the President.

"Check."

"What do we do with it in the meantime?" asked the Secretary of Defense.

"I don't know," said the President, throwing up his hands. "Put him or her or it in the Lincoln bedroom. Make sure there are towels. Now get out of here and let me go to sleep."

"Thank you, Mr. President," said an advisor. The President just glared.

I learned all of this from one of the advisors present at the time. This guy is now appealing a court decision that could send him to prison for five years, because of some minor thing he had done a long time ago and which none of us understand. He's also writing a book about the Cobae affair.

I wonder how well the President slept that night.

The next morning, when they went to get the Coba, someone knocked on the door (come to think of it, what made him think that a Coba would know what knocking on a door meant?). There was no response. The aide, one of the more courageous people in the history of our nation, sweated a little, fiddled around a little, knocked again, sweated some more, and opened the door.

Twelve Cobae stood like statues in the room. The aide shut the door and went crying through the halls of the Executive Mansion.

Later, when the advisors questioned the twelve Cobae, they discovered that only one would reply and only with yes or no answers. It was assumed that this Coba was the original Coba who had appeared in the President's bedroom the evening before. There really was no logical basis on which to make this assumption, but it was made nevertheless. No one ever got around to asking the simple question that would have decided the matter; no one thought the matter was important enough to decide.

You know what the strange thing about the twelve Cobae was? You probably do. The strange thing about them was that they all looked the same. I mean, identical. Not the way that you say all of some ethnic group look the same. I mean that if you photographed the twelve Cobae individually, you could superimpose the pictures by projecting them on a screen, and there wouldn't be the smallest difference among them.

"Clones," said one knowledgeable man. "All grown from the same original donor."

"No," said another expert. "Even if that were the case, they would have developed differently after the cloning. There would be some minor differences."

"A very recent cloning," insisted the first.

"You're crazy," said the second. This typified the kind of discussion that the Cobae instigated among our best minds at the time.

When the Cobae had been around for a day or two, the President signed the orders creating the top-security base in St. Didier Parish, Louisiana. I was transferred down, everyone else on the base was transferred down, and for a little while we worked in relative comfort and ignorance. Then the day came when the general and his colonels arrived, and the twelve Cobae right behind. The four black cars drove straight to a barracks that had been in disuse since the installation was opened. The Cobae were put in there, each in its (I get confused about the pronouns) own room. Major McNeill was present, and so was I. I thought I was going to throw up. That passed, but not quickly enough. Not nearly.

The general spoke with Major McNeill. I couldn't understand their conversation, because it was mostly whispers and nods. One of the colonels asked me if the Cobae would be comfortable in their quarters. I said, "How should I know? Sir."

The general heard us. He looked at the Cobae. "Will you be comfortable here?" he asked.

"Yes," said the Coba who did all the answering.

"Is there anything you'd like now?" asked the general.

"No," said the Coba.

"If at any time you wish anything, anything at all," said the general, "just pick up this telephone." The general demonstrated by picking up the receiver. He neglected to consider that the Cobae would have a difficult time making their wants known, limited to two words, yes and no.

A tough guard was put on the building. The general and the two colonels beat it back to their car and disappeared from the base. I looked at the major, and he looked at me. None of this had been discussed with us beforehand, because the matter was so secret it couldn't be trusted either on paper or over normal communications channels. No codes, no scrambling, nothing could be trusted. So the general plopped the twelve Cobae at our doorstep, told us to hang tight, that scientists would arrive shortly to study the beings (is *beings* any better than *creatures?* I don't want to be accused of being a human chauvinist. Okay. From now on, they're aliens, because they are, and they're individually it, because it's neutral enough), and that we were doing a wonderful job.

It was a Thursday, I recall. After we left the building housing the Cobae, I looked at the major. He looked at me and shrugged. Neither of us had anything to say. I went to the gym building and changed clothes. It was basketball night, Cobae or no Cobae.

I remember once, not long after the Cobae came to Louisiana, when Major McNeill asked me to show the aliens around. I said all right. I had gotten over my initial reaction to the Cobae. So had the men on the base. They were used to seeing the Cobae all over the installation. As a matter of fact, we became *too* used to seeing them. I'd be doing something, like picking a red Jell-O over a green in the mess line, and there would be a Coba looking over my shoulder. I'd take a shower after a basketball game, and when I walked out of the shower room, a Coba would be standing there, watching silently, while I dried myself off with a towel. We didn't like it, exactly, but we got used to it. Still, it was spooky the way they appeared and disappeared. I never saw one pop in or pop out, yet they did it, I guess.

From the arrival of the Cobae, our base became really super-secure. No passes, no furloughs, no letters out, no telephones. I suppose we all understood, but none of us liked it, from Major McNeill down to the lowest enlisted man. We were told that the country and the world were slowly being prepared to accept the news of a visitation by aliens from space. I've read the slow, steady progression of news-

paper accounts, prepared in Washington. It was a fairly good job, I suppose, because when the first pictures and television news films of the Cobae were made available, there was little uproar and no general panic. There was a great deal of curiosity, some of it still unsatisfied.

I was starting to tell about this particular time when I was giving a guided tour to the Cobae. I showed them all the wonderful and impressive things about the base, like the high wire fence with electrified barbed wire on top, and the tall sentry towers with their machine gun emplacements, and the guards at the main gate and their armaments, and the enlisted men going about their duties, cleaning weapons, drilling in the heat, double-timing from place to place. If I had been a Coba, I think I might have written off Earth right then and there. Back to the ship or whatever, back into the sky, back to the home world.

The twelve Cobae, however, showed no sign of interest or emotion. They showed nothing. You've never seen such nothing. And all the time, only the one Coba would speak, and then only when asked a question to which he could reply with either of his two words. He understood everything, of course, but for some reason, some crazy Coba reason, he wouldn't use the words he understood in his answers.

I took the aliens through the gym building. I got one of the more startling surprises of my life. A game was going on. Ten men were playing basketball, full court. It wasn't as rough as a Tuesday/Thursday game, but it was still plenty physical under the boards. I mentioned casually that this was one of the favorite ways of spending off-duty time. The Cobae stood, immobile, and watched. I began to move ahead, ushering them along. They would not move. I had to stay with the Cobae. I didn't know what interested them so much. I sighed. At that time, no one had any idea what a Coba wanted or thought. I say that as if we do now. That just isn't so, even today, though we're closer to an understanding. I had no way of knowing then that the basketball game would be the link between us and these travelers through space.

Anyhow, I was stuck with the Cobae until the game ended. After that, when the players had gone to the showers, I asked if the Cobae wished to see more of the compound. The answerer said, "Yes." I showed them around some more. Nothing else was interesting to them, I guess, because they just passed in front of everything, their expressions blank behind their masks. They never stopped like

they had at the basketball court.

Basketball is to sports as jazz is to music: completely American in origin. Sure, all right, I'll get arguments that the roots of basketball and the roots of jazz belong elsewhere. I don't give a damn. The game has changed since Dr. James Naismith hung up his two peach baskets in 1891. The rules have remained basically the same, but the style of play within those rules has altered considerably.

You have different sets of rules, however. You have professional basketball, college ball, high school ball. Minor variations among the different kinds of basketball exist to improve the game at its various levels. Professional, college, high school.

And then you have playground basketball. When basketball was first invented, and during its first few decades of existence, all the players were white. In the professional leagues this continued longer than on the lower levels. Why? Because of the same reasons that everything else remained white until the black man shouldered his way into a kind of equal position.

For basketball, it was one of the greatest things to happen to the game. The great pro players were white in the early years. Once blacks were allowed to play against them, the blacks began dominating the game. Bill Russell, Wilt Chamberlain, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, Elgin Baylor, and dozens of others have causd a reappraisal of old strategies. Julius Erving, Artis Gilmore. David Thompson. All black, all great, all exciting to watch. Russell single-handedly changed the pro game, as his shot blocking and aggressive defensive play intimidated his opponents. Chamberlain used his height and strength to block the lane in front of the basket. He could take a basketball, hold it in one hand, and slam it down into the hoop. Because of him, the slam dunk was outlawed in college play. Watching Julius Erving, Dr. J, was like watching a beautifully choreographed dance. His body control in the air was phenomenal. He once held two balls, one in each hand, and slam-dunked them backwards, over his head.

Why have blacks taken over professional basketball almost entirely? I have a theory. Sure. But it's full of generalizations, and they're as valid as most generalizations. Sort of, you know. Pretty valid, kind of.

Where do these black ballplayers come from? From ghetto neighborhoods, from poor urban and rural communities. Not without exception, of course, but it's a good enough answer. In a ghetto neighborhood — say, in New York — there just isn't physical space for

baseball diamonds and football fields. There are basketball courts all over, though. They can fit into a smaller space. You can see a basketball hoop attached to the side of a building, with groups of kids stuffing the ball into it, again and again.

Take white players. A lot of them come from better backgrounds. A white kid growing up in a town or suburb has a basketball hoop mounted on the garage. He plays by himself or with a couple of friends.

On the ghetto playgrounds, basketball can be a vicious demonstration of one's identity. Six, eight black youths beneath a basketball hoop can turn the game into something almost indistinguishable from a gang war. Meanwhile, the white kids are tossing the ball and catching the rebounds and tossing the ball. The black kids are using every move, every clever head fake, every deceiving twist of the body to demonstrate their superiority. It's the only way many black youths have of asserting themselves.

These things are reflected in the professional players. The white players, often, are the forwards, taking long shots from outside. The black players are the quick, ball-handling guards, running and twisting and passing with the kind of skill that leaves an observer breathless. The larger, taller blacks, such as Jabbar, serve as centers. Few white centers can match the tall blacks in scoring or on defense. Sure, there are exceptions. Erving, for instance, was a forward, but his moves to the basket were the most unique the game had ever seen. They were playground moves.

The best way out of a ghetto is through sports. Mostly, that means basketball. The kind of basketball one learns on a ghetto court is unlike any other variety of the sport. It's the kind of ball we played. I was out of my class, and I knew it. But I could play well enough so that I wasn't laughed off the floor.

The Tuesday/Thursday games were playground games, played under playground rules. There were no referees to call fouls. There were no fouls. It used to be said that basketball was not a contact sport, like football. Yeah. Try playing an hour with guys who came out of Harlem in New York, or Hough in Cleveland, or Watts in Los Angeles. Those guys know just how much punishment they can deliver without being obvious. Elbows and knees fly. You spend more time lying painfully on the ground than you do in the game. Playground moves, playground rules. Hard basketball. Mean basketball.

I played with blacks, mostly. Teams were chosen the same way as on ghetto courts. The people who show up for the game take turns

shooting the ball from the free-throw line. The first five to put the ball into the net are one team. The next five are the second team. Everyone else watches. The watchers could go back to the quarters without limping. Few of the players could.

I played often because I practiced my free throws. In off-duty hours, I sometimes went to the gym alone and shot free throws for a while. I was good at it. I could sink maybe eight out of ten shots, most of them swishes — the basketball went cleanly through the hoop without hitting the backboard, without touching the metal rim. All that you could hear was a gentle *snick* as the net below the rim moved.

I was a good free-throw shooter. By myself, that is, without another player guarding me, waving his arms, pressing close, without the other players shouting and running. You don't get such an open shot during a game very often. Without fouls, there are no free throws. During a game I was lucky to score ten points.

The games were an hour long, no breaks. That's a lot of running, up and down the court. Even the pros only play forty-eight minutes, resting some of those minutes on the bench, with plenty of time-outs called by the coaches, with breaks for half-time and fouls and free throws and television commercials. We played harder. We felt it. But on those rare occasions when I did something right, it was worth everything I had to take. It was worth it. *Snick.*

An unwritten law: ranks are left in the locker room. I wasn't a captain on the basketball floor. I was a white guy who wanted to play with the black enlisted men. Sometimes I did. After a while, when I showed that I could almost hold my own, the blacks grudgingly accepted me, kind of, sort of, almost. They gave me a nickname. They called me "the short honkey."

About September, the group of scientists had arrived and begun their work. It went slowly, because only one of the Cobae could be interviewed and he still said only yes or no.

"Do you come from this part of the galaxy?" asked one man.

"No," said the Coba.

"Do you come from this galaxy at all?"

"No."

The scientist was left speechless. Two thoughts struck him immediately. The Cobae had come a very long way, somehow; and it would be very difficult to learn where their home was. All the scientist could do was run through a list of known galaxies until the Coba said yes. And the knowledge

would be almost meaningless, because within that galaxy would be millions of stars, none of which could be pinpointed from Earth. The interviewer gave up the attempt. To this day, we don't know where the Cobae came from.

I had, of course, made a report about the reactions of the Cobae to my guided tour, several weeks earlier. One of the demographers thought that the interest the Cobae had shown in the basketball game was worthy of exploration. He proposed that the Cobae be allowed to watch another game.

The game the scientists chose was a Tuesday night bell-ringer. "Bell-ringer" because if you tried to grab a rebound against the more agile, stronger black enlisted men, you had your bell rung. The Cobae were seated in an area out of bounds, along with a team of specialists watching the reactions of the aliens. Of course, there weren't many reactions. There weren't any at all, while the group of black enlisted men and I shot free throws for teams. I ended up on a pretty good team. I was set for a hard game. The first team, mine, had the ball first. I took the ball out of bounds and tossed it to Snacks Johnson. He dribbled down-court and passed the ball to Willy Foster. Foster was tall and quick. His opponent stretched out both arms, but Foster slithered beneath one arm, got around his opponent, jumped, and shot. The ball banked off the backboard and into the net. We were ahead, two to nothing.

The other team in-bounded and started to dribble down-court. I was running to cover my defensive assignment, as loose and flexible as it was. We weren't pros. We didn't play defense with the sophisticated style of trained athletes. We just chose a man to cover and tried to prevent him from scoring. Sometimes an opponent would set a pick by standing still on the floor. That's called establishing position. The man with the ball would see his teammate and run by him. The man guarding the ball handler wouldn't know about the stationary opponent, run into him, and likely end up on the floor. If he was very lucky, he wouldn't crack a couple of ribs. In the pros, even in college, the players are shouting all the time, warning each other of picks being set, switching their coverage from man to man as the opposing team runs its play.

Anyway, as the other team brought the ball down, I saw an odd sight. Five of the Cobae had stood up and were walking out onto the basketball court. The scientists had risen out of their chairs. One man turned to the remaining seven Cobae and asked if the five wanted to play. There was silence. The speaker was among the five.

"Do you wish to join the game?" I asked the five. I couldn't tell which among them was the speaker.

"Yes," said one Coba. Behind the masks, they all looked the same. I couldn't tell which Coba had answered. "What do I do?" I asked the scientists.

"Ask if they know the rules," said one.

"Do you know and understand how this game is played?" I asked.

"Yes," said the speaker.

I stood there for a while, bewildered.

"Aw, come on," said one of the black men. "Don't let those mothers screw up the game."

"They play," said one of the scientists. The blacks were obviously angry.

"All right," I said, assuming my captain's rank again. "My team against the Cobae. You other guys go sit down." The blacks who had been put out of the game were furious, but they followed my order. I heard a lot of language that the Cobae might not have understood. At least, I hope they didn't understand.

"What we goin' to do with these blue bastards?" asked Foster.

"Play them loose," I said. "Maybe they just want to try it for a while. Don't hit any of them."

"Just like my mamma was playin'," said Bobby O. Brown.

"Yeah," I said. "Five blue monster mammas."

The scientists were busily talking into their recorders and videotaping what was happening. I gave the ball to Johnson. He took it out and tossed it in to me. I started dribbling, but there was a Coba guarding me. He played close. I glanced over at Johnson, who was running down-court beside me. He had a Coba guard, too. The Coba had gone to a full-court press.

Where had they learned about a full-court press?

I passed over my Coba's head to Foster. A Coba nearly intercepted the ball. Foster put a good move on his Coba guard, twisted around, and spun in the other direction. It would have worked against me and a lot of the others on the floor, but he ran into another Coba, who had anticipated Foster's move. Foster hit the Coba hard, but he kept dribbling. The Coba reached out and swiped the ball away from Foster. "Goddamn it," said Foster.

The Coba threw a long pass to another alien down-court. The second Coba was all alone and made a nice layup for the first score of the game. The aliens were winning, two to nothing. I couldn't believe it.

The game continued for the entire hour. As it went on, my team began to play harder and harder. We had to. The Cobae were quick, anticipating moves as if they had played basketball all their lives.

Our shots were blocked, or our men were prevented from getting near the basket, and we had to settle for long, low-percentage shots. The Cobae were playing with perfect teamwork, though. They had no difficulty finding one of their players open on offense. It didn't make any difference how we defensed them; one player was always maneuvering clear, and the Coba with the ball always passed it to the open man (alien). After the first half hour, the Cobae were winning by a score of forty-eight to twenty.

"Break," I called. "Take a rest." The black players walked off the court, muttering. All of them were glaring at me, at the aliens, at the scientists.

Monroe Parks passed near me. I could hear him say, "You can order me around all goddamn day, but don't mess with the game, you ofay son of a bitch." I said nothing.

I changed teams. The other blacks played the second half. I sat down and watched. The second half was the same as the first. The Cobae were playing a tight game, perfect defense, amazing offense. They took no chances, but they were always in the right place. The final score was one hundred four to fifty-two, in favor of the Cobae.

The scientists were just as confused as I was. I didn't care, though, right at the time. I went to the showers. The blacks showered, too, and none of us said a word. Not a sound. But there were some mean looks directed at me.

The following Thursday, the five Cobae came to the gym for the game. The enlisted men started cursing loudly, and I had to order them to stop. Five black men played five Cobae. The Cobae won the game by sixty points.

The next Thursday, the Cobae won by forty-eight points.

On Tuesday, there wasn't a game, because only the Cobae and me showed up.

I wonder what would have happened if I had suggested to the speaker of the Cobae that me and two of his companions would play the remaining three Cobae.

Even though there were no more games with the Cobae, the scientific team that had come to study the aliens did not stop questioning me. It seemed to them that I was closer to the Cobae than anyone else on the base. I don't know. Against the Cobae, I averaged about three points a game. Maybe they should have talked to Foster; he got a pretty regular ten.

Major McNeill received regular reports from Washington, about

how the program to reveal the presence of aliens on Earth was progressing. He showed me those reports. I read them, and I was at once amused and concerned. Well, after all, maybe I *did* know the Cobae at least as well as anyone else, including the specialists who had assembled at our installation. But the newspaper and television releases grew from hints and rumors to denials and finally a grudging, low-key admission that there were, in fact, a few intelligent visitors from another galaxy in seclusion somewhere in the United States.

The immediate reaction was acceptable, and the fellows in Washington did a good job at regulating the subsequent reactions. The Soviet Union came forward with a claim that they, too, had visitors from beyond Earth. The People's Republic of China said something that didn't make much sense, and I can't even remember what it was. One of the scientists asked the Cobae if there were any more of them on Earth, beside the twelve in our compound. The speaker said no. So if the Soviet Union had their own aliens, they were from somewhere else, and we never saw them, in any case.

The Cobae showed a preference for remaining in their quarters, once it became evident that the basketball games were postponed indefinitely (read, "as long as the Cobae were around"). The scientists put their data together, argued, discussed, shouted, and like that. Major McNeill and I ignored it all, from that point on, because we still had a security installation to run. The scientists and researchers were doing their best to bend our regulations whenever it was comfortable for them to try. The major and I came down hard on them. I guess they didn't understand us, and we didn't understand them.

So which group of us were better qualified to understand the Cobae?

Nobody, that's who. Finally, though, about the middle of October, the nominal head of the investigating team called a meeting, to which Major McNeill was invited. I came along, because I was indispensable or something. The meeting began as a series of reports, one by every single scientist and specialist in the camp. I can't recall another time when I was so bored. Somehow, they managed to make something as awesome as creatures (sorry) from another world boring. It takes a good deal of skill, many years of training, constant practice, and self-denial to do a job that huge. But boring it was. The major was fidgeting before the first man had gone through half of his graphs. There were plottings of something against something else,

and I wondered where the guy got the information. He had a nice bunch of graphs, though, very impressive, very authoritative-looking. He spoke clearly, he enunciated very well, and he rarely had to refer to his notes. Still, I was ready to scream myself before he finished. I don't remember a thing he was trying to say. In the weeks that he had to study the Cobae, he didn't come across a single, solitary interesting fact.

Maybe that wasn't his department, I told myself. So I waited for the second researcher. He, too, had plenty of visual aids. He took a pointer and showed how his red line moved steadily down, while his blue line made a bell-shaped curve. I waited, but he was every bit as lacking in informational content as his predecessor.

That's the way it went for most of the afternoon. I think that if I had been put in charge of those statisticians and, uh, alienographers, I might have done a better job. I might be fooling myself, of course, but I think I would have tried to learn why the Cobae had come to Earth in the first place. No one could give us a clue about that. Even with yes-and-no answers, they should have been able to do that. Am I getting warm? Yes. No. Am I getting cold?

I think the idea is to start big and narrow down until you have the Cobae cornered, in an intellectual sense. Ask them if they came to Earth for a definite purpose. Yes or no. If the Coba answered no, well, they're all on vacation. If it said yes, start big again and whittle away until you learn something.

But evidently that's not the way our men and women of the research team worked. A large report was eventually published, excerpts appeared in newspapers and magazines, and not many people were satisfied. I'd still like to take my crack at the Cobae, my way. But I can't.

So, in any event, scientist after researcher after pedant after lecturer had his say. I got up after half an hour and went to the back of the room, where two enlisted men were setting up a film projector. Both men were black. One was a regular basketball player I knew, Kennedy Turner, and the other's name I don't recall. I watched them threading the films. I was only slightly less boring than listening to the speeches. I noticed that right beside me was Major McNeill. He, too, was watching Turner thread film. After the film was threaded, the two men turned to a videotape machine.

"You want to kill the lights, please?" said the woman on the platform. Turner hastened to turn off the lights. "Roll that first reel, please," said the woman. The other enlisted man flicked a switch. I

watched a few seconds of a basketball game. I saw myself embarrassed by the play of a short alien. "It seems to me, gentlemen," said the woman, "that these Cobae are governed by a single mind. I don't know how I can make the idea clearer. Perhaps the mind belongs to the Coba who always answers. But the visual input, *all* the sensory input of the twelve Cobae is correlated and examined by the central mind. That was what made the Cobae so effective in this game, although we know through our questioning that they had never seen anything similar before."

"A single governing mind?" asked a man seated in the audience.

"Yes," said the woman. "Capable of overseeing everything that is happening to all twelve units of the Cobae multipersonality. The basketball game here is a perfect example. Watch. See how every human move is anticipated, even by Cobae players on the opposite side of the court? One mind is observing everything, hovering above, so to speak, and decisions and commands are addressed to the individual Cobae to deal with any eventuality."

(I'm editing this from memory, of course. We didn't know they were called Cobae until much later. We just called them beings or creatures or aliens or blue men or something until then.)

"I'd like to ask a question, if I may—"

The man was interrupted by the lights going on again.

"Not yet, please," said the woman. She stopped speaking and gasped. Everyone turned around. The twelve Cobae were in the back of the room.

The Coba speaker stepped forward. "Now you honkey mothers better dig what's going down," it said. "We got to tighten up around here, we got to get down to it. You dig where I'm coming from?"

I looked at Turner and his black companion. They were smiling and laughing. Turner held out his hands, palms up, and the other man slapped them. Turner slapped his friend's palms. They were having a good time.

I turned to Major McNeill. Everyone in the room was speechless. There was a long pause. Then the major whispered to me. "Uh-oh," was all he said.

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LETTERS

The following is a fair sampling of the flood of mail we received about the special Harlan Ellison issue (July 1977).

Your special Ellison issue was certainly a worthwhile and welcome addition to the long line of F&SF special issues (suggestions for the future: Brian Aldiss, Philip Jose Farmer, Philip K. Dick, Arthur Clarke, Robert Bloch, Keith Roberts), but I think in his article "You Don't Know Me etc." Harlan doth protest, not too much, but in vain. When he asks why *Perry Rhodent* far outsells better things, he betrays an inability to come to terms with one of the most basic facts of the writing and publishing world.

There is no justice in this world, orangutan slobberings win prizes in painting contests, and *the lowest common denominator audience is the largest audience.* Sturgeon's law — 90% of everything is crud — applies not merely to the stuff being published, but to the people who read it. 90% of what is published is crud because 90% of the audience insists on it. There is no evil conspiracy to keep good books out of wide circulation. They don't sell as well because only the top ten percent of the audience, the most critical, perceptive, and mature segment of the audience can understand them. *Rhodent, The Sword of Shannara,* and *Star Trek* are far more accessible to more people than a late Silverberg novel ever will be, or an Ellison collection for that matter. No amount of protesting in angry articles will ever change this. It is the nature of the human species. And, since all publishers except a few labor-of-love specialty press types are in business to make money, it only follows that they'll pay more for and give greater promotion to books which will sell the most copies and bring the most money back: the simplistic, cookie-cutter novels and slackbrain pseudo-"fact" material like *Chariots of The Gods* or Sybil Leek's astrology hokum. As Sprague de Camp is always saying, people will pay money to be bunked, but never to be debunked.

The only compensating factor in all this is the fact that the moron level audience isn't very critical. Books for this group are the easiest to produce, and what is written for this generation of morons will be duplicated without much effort by the *next* generation of moronic writers. In the long run this audience has no favorites. Books of this type make lots of money fast, then vanish utterly.

I think any writer has to make a choice: big money fast, and oblivion, or less money at first and a longer literary life, perhaps immortality. It is very hard to have both, and no one can do it by anything but accident. The discriminating audience will treasure a good book years after it is written. Thus a book like *More Than Human* was remaindered almost at once when published in the early 1950's, but now it's a classic in print in many countries. In commercial terms this means, *in the long run,* good, careful work is a better commercial property overall, but it is slow to produce any rewards. If Harlan wants Jackie Susann's money he must meet the demands of Jackie Susann's audience. Nothing can change this.

And if he does, he'll go the way of Jackie Susann, into the junk shelves in 2nd hand bookstores, just like George Barr McCrutcheon, Harold Bell Wright, and all the others of this ilk who served and got rich from previous generations of low level readers.

I think Silverberg assumed it up best in the interview I did with him (which can be found in my book, *SF Voices* from T. K. Graphics):

"I am not concerned with getting a large audience, *per se*. I have no intention of being Harold Robbins. I wouldn't mind making his money, but I don't want to do stuff that's so accessible that millions and millions of people all over the world read it, because all important fiction, all really powerful fiction, literary art, has been an elite art. I think that anything worthwhile is either folk art or elite art but nothing in between. The gray area of commercialism is useless and short-lived."

Anybody who's going to be an elitist must accept both the rewards and the tribulations of being one.

—Darrell Schweitzer

I do not regularly purchase *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*. The local library's subscription copy is usually enough for my purposes; one reading, cover-to-cover, and I am done with the book. The July 1977 issue, the Harlan Ellison special, was another matter. I saw the book on the newsstands, examined it's contents, and bought it; all in one nearly-fluid motion. A most worthwhile purchase it was; however, for the first time I find myself in the uncomfortable position of being affronted by something Harlan has written. Not the stories, mind you — but the article of commentary "You Don't Know Me, I Don't Know You".

I found myself pretty much in agreement with the diatribes against publishers and the ghettoization of SF (though I find a rather unsubtle irony in the fact that there are thousands of unpublished writers who would give their left arm — the one they don't type with — to reside in the same ghetto that Ellison and a few others despise so vehemently) ... but when Harlan began his scathing attacks on the turkeys of fandom, he lost my sympathy.

I can't vouch for anyone else, Harlan, but I feel insulted. I wasn't in that elevator, or even at that convention; I don't contribute to fanzines; I'm not at all active in fandom; I don't do anything but *read* the stuff ... but I feel insulted. Turkeys or not, I (and others like me) pay good money for your books, put food on your table, and enable you to meet the rent on Ellison Wonderland. There is an element of biting the hand that feeds you in your scathing attacks on We Turkeys, and I'm not enough of a masochist to not be angered and a little saddened by these remarks.

Still, the most saddening moments of this article were when you spoke of your fourth broken marriage and — worse; oh, incalculably worse — the death of your mother. This saddens me because I have recognized you as, if not one of God's Good Guys, at least one of His Good Writers, and I wish you nothing but the best. Please ... allow me to extend my condolences, the utmost sympathies that a young man who has neither been touched by the spectre of death nor endured the bonds of holy wedlock can offer. Scant comfort, I know, but what more can I do? I don't even *know* you ... and it's obvious you have no desire to know me.

—Bryan Uhlenbrock

Thank you muchly for the Special HARLAN ELLISON issue — and thanks to Harlan for pounding out those three stories; every one a gem. Went nuts over *Jeffty is Five*; double worth the extra time he says he spent on it.

I haven't read the rest of the issue yet, just all the Ellison stuff, articles and all — dynamite.

Oh — the Freas cover was a blockbuster, to say the least. I'm pretty sure that's him in the lower right corner — and a couple of the other gremlins seem familiar — Andy Capp (?) — Kojak (?) — Kissinger (or is that Asimov?) —

I've been looking all over for even a *short* list of Ellison stories; stuff I haven't read yet; Leslie Kay Swigart's Checklist is worth umpteen times the cover price of the issue.

Guess that's it — just wanted to say thanks.

— Ken Hahn

Robert Silverberg's touching — and hilarious — tribute to Ellison was the high point of one of your finest issues. The best part was trying to imagine Harlan's reaction to Silverbob's gentle anecdotes. Both men have a way with words.

— Brad Linaweaver

I would imagine there are many persons like myself who have experienced many fine moments of reading pleasure from a man called Ellison. And some of us, perhaps those who exist behind walls of silent/private desperations, neither wish to praise the man nor bury him. Our task, instead, is a simple one of human courtesy. The words which come to mind are: Thank You, Harlan Ellison.

— Chip Mosher

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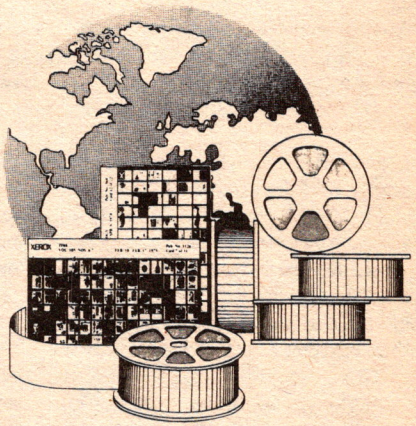

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